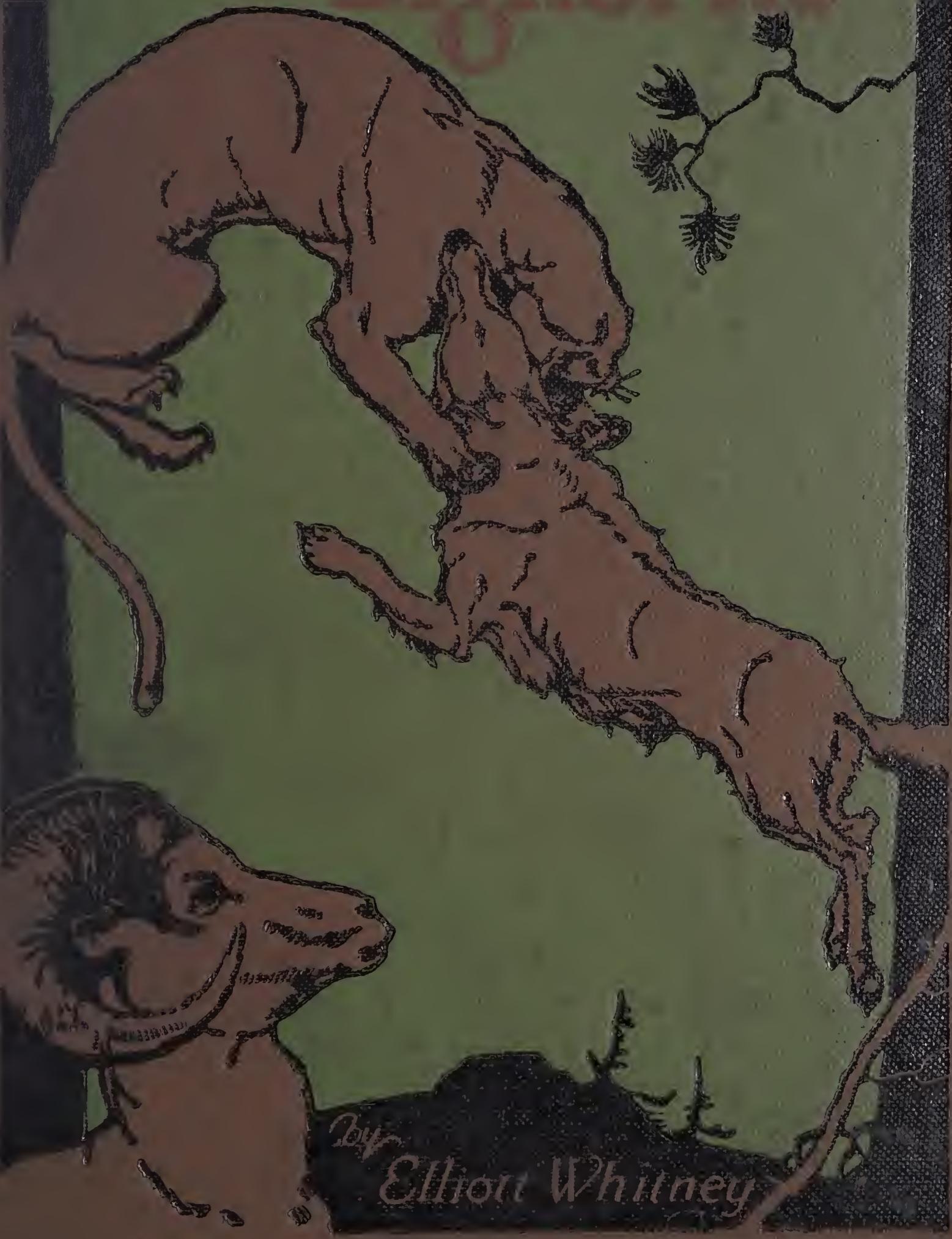


# The Dogs of the Highmore



By  
Elton Whitney



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The Boys' Big Game Series

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The Boss of the Bighorns







I sprang back hastily—Page 228

# The Boss of the Bighorns

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## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I FIRST SIGHT OF THE BOSS.....	9
II THE CLEW OF THE GOLDEN NUGGET...	25
III THATCH RAWLINS CALLS.....	41
IV IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY.....	56
V TRAILING THE CLAIM-JUMPER.....	75
VI THE FIRST MAN FIGHT.....	92
VII BOSS LEADS THE WAY.....	107
VIII A DEAD MAN'S TALE.....	124
IX THE MIDNIGHT BURIAL.....	144
X BIG JIM'S DARK DAY.....	166
XI THE LONG TRAIL.....	181
XII A STRANGE ADVENTURE.....	193
XIII THE BATTLE OF THE BUCKS.....	206
XIV A FIGHT IN THE DARK.....	221
XV BOSS SAVES HIS NAME.....	236



# The Boss of the Bighorns

## CHAPTER I

### FIRST SIGHT OF THE BOSS

I may some day see a stranger sight, but I doubt it. You may say this is because I am only nineteen years old and easy to excite, or that I am pretty green as a hunter. Neither theory fits. I had been in the mountains for forty days, hunting big game on at least thirty of them. I had been awed by deep gorges and chasms, tumbling waterfalls and sheer precipices; I had taken my shot at a grizzly and lived through — with unshaken nerves — that dread moment when, wounded, he turned on me and my rifle jammed!

So, I say, I've had thrills a-plenty, yet I have never witnessed a stranger sight than that lone fight atop — but there, best let me give you the whole story and you can be the judge.

Big Jim had gone to Tartel for supplies, leaving me to guard camp, forage for small game, or do what I pleased. We had been in this same spot for three days, as Big Jim was in the dumps and had lost all desire to go farther. About once each week a fit of despondency came upon Jim, nor would you blame him for this if you knew his errand in the Rockies. Big Jim Raily was the best hunter, keenest shot and surest trailer that I ever expect to see. Yet he had no great interest in any four-footed beast that roamed these mountains. His deep-set eyes were peering for a more subtle trail than was ever made by bighorn sheep or slinking mountain lion.

Jim had left for town at sun-up. After spending the early morning hours in cleaning up equipment, I decided to take my rifle and cross over the big gully that lay directly before our camp. Although we had been here for three days and the gully looked none too forbidding, so far I had stayed on the camp side, chiefly because each new day brought a promise from Jim that "tomorrow" he would take me across into the bighorn country. Then he would launch into a tale

of bighorn hunting that set my blood to racing.

Jim would not be back before sundown, even if he did not decide to stay all night in Tartel, and the three days' stay in camp had just about exhausted all the possibilities of the low hills to eastward. Unless I crossed over to the hills beyond there was a dull day before me. A two hours' climb, down and up, would take me to the crest of the low ridge opposite. What lay beyond that I did not know, and throwing my 30-30 into the crook of my arm, I started on a trip of discovery.

The route to the bottom of the gulch was easy enough, but the brook that dashed between steep banks and over black boulders was far deeper, wider, and colder than I had expected. For a hundred yards or so the opposite slope was very steep, but after that the going was easier.

Well within the two hours I stood under the scrubby pines that topped the ridge, and these so shut off my view that I could not determine whether there was another ravine ahead, or whether this was the first stage on the slope of a mountain.

Taking my bearings carefully, I began to pick my way through the pines. For half an hour I pushed forward, bearing due west. The ground was rough, strewn with great boulders on which grew moss and stunted cedars. Occasionally there would be a low hill or a shallow basin, but for the most part there was no noticeable change of altitude.

Then I came to the Big Drop. I named it that myself, standing there, awestruck, at the brink of a thousand foot chasm. It was as if a giant cheese knife had sliced away a prodigious helping of mouldy old Swiss.

Surprised as I was at this freak of nature, I was still more astonished a moment later. As I looked to the south where the wall angled back toward me I saw that, steep as the cliff was, some living creature had been bold enough to scale it. Faint in the distance, but unmistakably a trail, a tiny thread-like path traced back and forth, but ever upward.

Remembering Big Jim's promise, and knowing something of the wild folk dwelling in the Rockies, I decided that such a difficult feat of mountain

climbing could have been accomplished by but one creature — the bighorn sheep. With the thought came the desire to see the top of that trail.

Staying as close to the edge as I dared, I began picking my way along. The footing was not always the best and my progress was slow. It was a loose, stony slope, and a slip meant a thousand foot drop. Added to my uncertainty was the feeling that at any moment I might come face to face with the maker of the trail.

Then, as suddenly as the big moment flashes on the screen at the movie show, I ran plump into the scene that prompted the excited remark at the beginning of this story.

In the first view there was nothing so very strange or startling about the peaceful sight that met my eyes. It was just a big sheep, the biggest, finest buck I have ever seen. If you have ever seen a bighorn sheep in his own homeland, you will understand the thrill that went through me. Here at the top of the world, nothing above us but blue sky, a sheer thousand foot drop at our feet, a background of scrubby pine and mossy

boulders, only me and the bighorn — well, it gives a fellow a feeling!

He was standing quietly enough, not having scented me as the wind was blowing full in my face, but he was not feeding. It was as if he had just been disturbed, and having satisfied himself that all was well, was taking a quiet moment to think over the many false alarms of the past.

Minute after minute he stood there, hardly seeming to breathe, so motionless that he seemed a part of the rock on which he stood. I began to wonder if his thoughts were not still on the present alarm rather than the ones he had lived safely through.

I began looking about to see if my human eyes and ears could detect the disturbing element in the peaceful scene. Look as I might I failed to see anything unusual, unless it was a brown patch of leaves just back of a great boulder. A brown patch of leaves? Queer I should have called it that! What would a patch of leaves be doing in a pine forest?

Did it move? My eyes were beginning to ache from the close watch. Perhaps that twitch was

only in my tired lids, perhaps only imagination. To rest my eyes I looked away for a moment, then looked back.

The brown patch was gone!

As I have said, I had been hunting in the mountains for forty days, with the best teacher in the world as my constant companion. There had been many camp-fireside lessons, in story form, and nature's book was open to me on many pages. There is one foe the bighorn dreads above all others — the mountain lion!

That patch of brown which had so suddenly disappeared was a mountain lion. It was evident now that the bighorn knew it. He had faced about and with head down stood waiting the attack. This puzzled me. According to Big Jim the mountain sheep prefer to trust to their legs rather than their horns, knowing that no mountain lion will dare the dizzy heights, the wide chasms, the breath-taking leaps of which the bighorn is master.

Big Jim had said that the buck will show fight only when guarding his herd. Ah, perhaps that was the answer; he was guarding his

flock. I was sure of it an instant later. Rising suddenly on his hind legs, the buck came down with a jerk, three times in rapid succession, his hoofs clicking sharply on the rock. I heard a far sound of scurrying hoofs, then all was still. The buck once more lowered his head, his front guarded from easy attack by his wonderful horns.

“But where is the lion?” I asked myself. “He knows the buck is wise to him, and there’s nothing to be gained now by caution. Why doesn’t he spring?”

A mountain lion’s mind isn’t like yours and mine, and for a full five minutes he kept me waiting there, standing still as a statue. Finally I decided that the big cat, keener-eyed than his quarry, had spied me in that unguarded moment when I had first caught sight of this mountain-top drama. I kept this thought only an instant; the big buck had wheeled.

Standing on ground somewhat above the buck, I had the better view. Once more that patch of brown marred the scene. On the other side of the boulder now, just a half turn from where

the big buck was facing. I had a half impulse to shout a warning, but it would have been too late.

I saw an unmistakable quiver in the patch of brown; a brown marked with yellow and black, which, as I keened my eyes, took the form of a blocky head, eager forepaws and powerful chest. A second tremor like the pulse of chain lightning and then, without a sound, the great bulk rose in the air.

The lion's judgment of distance was good and the spring was perfectly timed. The buck whirled, but an instant too late.

As I rushed forward, not thinking of the danger, I saw the red blood spurt out of the bighorn's shoulder from a gash that ran all the way across the back. The buck went down, but as the two rolled off the rock he managed to pull free of the tearing claws and rending jaws and square himself for another attack.

It was easy to see that the lion was far from disappointed. His cat-like strides as he circled his prey, the lashing tail, the low, purring growls and snarls, all told more plainly than words that

he was well satisfied to have won first blood. He knew that it was only a matter of time until the buck, weakened by the loss of blood, would prove an easy victim of some cunning trick that would catch him off his guard.

In the meantime he must keep moving. The lion's mind was clever enough to see the advantage in that. He would dash in, halting just short of the menacing horns and the stamping feet; both equally dangerous weapons. One moment he would charge in a mad circle, trying to force the buck into tying himself in a knot; then he would slink along, crouched low, making quick darts and springs to cut past the buck's sword-point horns. More than one record he left of such half-hearted attempts, his claws ripping deep gashes on flank and shoulders. Each time the big-horn would shake his ponderous head, click his nimble feet and offer to charge, but the impulse was restrained. He was too wise to be tempted into such an unequal battle. His was a waiting game. The lion was playing the same game, and due to the success of his first attack he had the better of it.

After that first wild impulse to interfere I had stopped behind a clump of small rocks, my rifle ready for any need, but firmly decided to let the battle go to the better fighter. Who was I to interfere with nature's workings?

The contest showed signs of developing into a fair imitation of one of those "kid fights," where "one's afraid and the other daresn't". The lion paused to lick at a spot where evidently some tick had found a home, and the buck relaxed his vigilance long enough to nurse the few wounds he could reach. Came a flash of tawny brown; then a snort of mingled fear and defiance from the buck. He had foiled the lion's first trick.

It was only the first. It was plain to see that the buck was growing weaker, and he met each successive attack with less and less vigor. If the fight was to last much longer it could end in only one way — mountain mutton for dinner.

However, the lion, too, was growing weary of the fight. Once the buck had sunk the tip of a horn deep into his haunch, and once he had met a charge head-on, with at least some injury to the lion's nervous system. They had been work-

ing closer and closer to where I stood, the lion forcing the way, seemingly with some advantage in mind. In a flash I saw what it was.

Four rocks stood in a group with a narrow pass between them. If the buck attempted to go through, his sides and rear would be exposed and he could not turn to protect himself. The lion, the less courageous but more cunning of the two, saw the possibilities of such a situation; the buck merely saw the rocks as a temporary shelter.

At this point the scene changed with pulse-stirring rapidity, and you will perhaps agree with the statement made in the opening sentence of this story. I said: "I may some day see a stranger sight, but I doubt it."

The same instant in which the poor buck realized that he was trapped; the same second in which the lion crouched, his jaws dripping in anticipation of a long-expected feast, another actor entered the scene.

At first I thought it was the mate of the lion. There was the same tawny brown fur, the same panther-like slink of the body. But the head—there the resemblance ended.

It might be a wolf; I was not sure. He was no wolf breed that I had ever seen; neither the gaunt gray timber wolf, the prairie wolf, nor his cousin, the coyote. For all the hunting glare in his set eyes, there was a look there that I had never seen in any save a dog.

A dog on top of this mountain!

I had no time for speculation; things were happening too fast.

The lion sprang. A squeal of mortal agony rent the air as he landed squarely on the haunch of the terrorized buck. The buck tried to turn, to throw this snapping, clawing creature from his back. In vain. The lion wanted lifeblood and he was not to be denied.

Then it happened!

A deep-throated growl, so full of hate that it put my hair on end, then a flash of dusky yellow-brown, followed by a thud as a heavy body landed.

The events of the next few moments were too swift for me to relate. Almost too swift to see. I have witnessed many fights, but nothing to compare with this smashing, slashing, snapping, snarling combat of frenzied flesh and blood.

Beneath the two struggling bodies lay the poor buck, too far spent to offer combat in his own defense; too weak, indeed, to note whether the newcomer was friend or foe. Occasionally he made an attempt to struggle to his feet, and his horns inflicted more than one wound, but neither of the two contestants was favored.

For several minutes the battle hung in the balance. First one was uppermost then the other, though it was hard for me to see which was yellow-brown and which was brown-yellow.

Silently I stood there, wondering what it was all about. Were the two, the mountain lion and the dog — for I felt sure it was a dog — ancient enemies, or had the dog, too, been stalking the sheep?

All things must end, even a battle royal, and like most hard fights this one was finished almost as suddenly as it had begun. There was a moment's lull in the struggle; the two warriors sprang apart, glaring at each other, baring menacing fangs. Then the lion crouched, his muscles twitching for the spring. As his body left the ground the dog launched forward to meet the

attack. They met in mid-air — a dull thud as their bodies collided and fell to the ground, locked together. Neither stirred.

I saw at once what had happened. True to his nature the dog had leaped underneath, full at the throat of his foe. The battle was over; only death would shake that grip.

Satisfied at last that the mountain lion had stalked his last bighorn, the dog unlocked his jaws and dragged himself from beneath the heavy body. His mouth dripping bloody foam, he staggered dizzily a few steps, then squatted on his haunches to lick his wounds.

“Good dog!” I exclaimed, coming to life and stepping forward from behind my rocks.

My congratulations did not meet the welcome I had expected. Startled by the unexpected sound, the bighorn leaped to his feet and darted drunkenly away, in an instant lost to sight among the rocks and trees. The dog’s attitude was less retiring. His lips curled back in a snarl that was distinctly unfriendly, his hair bristled along his scruff and his jaws chattered in a way that said, gun or no gun, he would not give an inch.

We eyed each other. I advanced my hand in friendly fashion and took a step toward him. No use. The jaws ceased their chatter and the snarl became a growl.

“All right, old fellow,” I said with a laugh, “have it your own way. If we can’t be friends, we’ll just try to be good strangers. And I’ll hold on to my gun.”

I am afraid he did not understand my remarks, but he carried out a part of the program by proceeding to make himself a stranger. Giving one sniff to the inert form of the mountain lion, and a backward, distrustful look at me, he trotted away.

“Now what in thunder do you know about that!” I said to myself with a low whistle. “He’s nobody’s dog, I’ll gamble on that, but what in the world is he doing alone up here in these mountains?”

## CHAPTER II

### THE CLEW OF THE GOLDEN NUGGET

Reaching camp some two hours later, I thought at first that Big Jim had already returned; things did not seem to be where I had left them. But he was nowhere in sight and I concluded that I had had a visitor. Since nothing of any consequence had disappeared, I concluded that the few missing trinkets had engaged the attention of a family of pack rats that had been making us frequent visits. This question settled, I set about cooking a snack. After I had satisfied my hearty appetite I rearranged camp and settled down for a nap.

I was aroused none too gently, but even before I was awake I realized it was Big Jim.

“So this is what I find when I return home unexpectedly, Tod Vance! Thought I told you I’d like some broiled black bass with drawn butter dressing for dinner, served hot as soon as I arrived! ”

“ You should have wired me and made reservations,” I answered, wriggling out of his strong hand and jumping to my feet. “ Did you bring that pink ice cream I told you to get in town? You did not,” I asserted sternly, “ and for that you shall eat bacon, beans and black tea for supper — if you cook it yourself. Thank you, I have already dined.”

“ Good! ” exclaimed Jim jovially. “ Glad to hear it. I brought frankfurters and a mess of potatoes, and I was afraid there wouldn’t be enough to go around.”

“ Now that I think of it,” I remarked easily, “ it must have been yesterday that I ate that meal.”

“ All right, Tod, hop to it then and skin these ’taters. We’ll eat the franks with the hide on.”

“ Let’s roast ’em over the fire,” I suggested. “ They’re great that way.”

The potatoes, baked in the ashes, were a welcome treat, for we had not had any for weeks. All through the simple meal I caught Jim looking at me in the curious way he had when he was turning things over in his mind — much as if he

were measuring me up, inside and out. A dozen times I had it on the tip of my tongue to tell him about my excursion across the gulch and my curious adventure there, but something in Jim's look made me hold back. Finally, as the last frankfurter disappeared and the last flaky bit of baked potato was licked from fingers none too clean, he began:

“How tall are you, Tod?”

“Five-ten; one sixty-seven in my socks the day after washday.”

“Almost a man. And how old might you be, if you'll pardon an old man's curiosity?”

“Nineteen next month.”

“Three nineteens is fifty-seven. Fifteen years more and I'll be three times as old as you are.”

“Nix!” I exclaimed, making a rapid calculation. “Two years more and I'll be just half your age.”

“How quick he are!” chuckled Jim. “Now that you know my age, let me ask you one more question: How long since you left home?”

“Since home left me, you mean. I've been an orphan since I was six, living with my Aunt Jen.

She married four years ago and her husband and I weren't made to live under the same roof. A fine fellow, too, and nice as pie to Aunt Jen, but our minds simply didn't track. Mostly my fault, I guess. When I wanted to play baseball and football and basket ball, he thought I ought to be studying or doing chores. I kind of thought the dose ought to be mixed — a little play and a little work. One day we had it out. He thought I was 'sassy'. Guess maybe I was, but I really didn't mean it that way. Then he wanted to thrash me — got mad when I told him he'd have to lick me first. We were good friends again next day, but I'd had a chance to think things over all by my lone and that night I told Aunt Jen that in the future I'd fight my own battles.

"I stayed at home for nearly six months after that, but I got a job for after school and evenings and Saturdays, and I paid board. When I'd saved up a hundred, and school was out, I got a real job. After a few years of that you came along — "

"And here we are, high and dry in the Rockies, and you wondering all the time what we're here

for — what you are here for, at any rate.”

“ I must admit I have rather won — ”

“ Young man, your sole reason for being here is to keep me from going batty with loneliness.”

“ Why didn’t you get yourself a parrot or a phonograph? It would have been cheaper.”

“ A phonograph can’t work nor could it have pulled the trigger when that old grizzly had me backed up against the edge of a cliff! ”

“ Forget it,” I suggested with a laugh. “ I had buck fever so bad I didn’t know which was you and which the bear. So I just shut my eyes and shot, figuring you’d dodge if I picked the wrong one.”

“ Awful glad the bear didn’t dodge. Have you ever wondered why I was here? ”

“ Well, yes, at times. I knew all along that you weren’t just hunting; not for game, at least. But what you *were* hunting for — well, that wasn’t any of my business.”

“ Tod Vance, you have one quality that I admire — you keep a close mouth. You remind me of a sentence I once read somewhere or other, on a postcard I reckon it was: ‘ A simple, silent,

selfless man is worth a world of tonguesters.' That's the one big reason I picked on you to gang along with me. I hate a jabberwock. So many people talk without saying anything."

"Then you'd have loved a boy they tell about back home," I said, laughing. "Dumb, he was, from birth. Never spoke a syllable. Bright enough, too, and a great worker. Folks were farmers, so it didn't make much difference whether he could talk or not. One day he and his father were out in the timber cutting poles. They discovered a bear cub, lost from its mother and whimpering like a baby. Father decided to put it in the wagon and take it along home—they were about ready to start. Just then the mother bear missed her cub and came charging through the brush. She was almost upon the father, stumbling along with his struggling load, and he did not hear her.

"'Father! Father!' shouted the dumb boy. 'The mother bear is right behind you!'

"The father was so astonished to hear his son speak that he dropped the cub, and mother and cub quickly disappeared in the woods.

“ ‘ Son, son,’ exclaimed the happy parent, ‘ you can talk! But why have you not spoken before? ’

“ ‘ Nothing to say,’ replied the dummy.”

“ Humph,” said Jim. “ Seems to me I heard that story back home in England about a Scotch boy.”

“ Back home in England! ” I exclaimed, forgetting that Jim liked me because I asked no questions.

“ Yes, England. Thought I was a Yankee, did you? Almost am. Haven’t seen England in ten years and don’t expect to again. This country’s good enough for me — after I find what I’m looking for. Oh, I’ll tell you all about it,” as he saw the question that fairly popped out of my eyes.

“ I’m a Britisher, or was. I enlisted from Canada during the big scrap and went all through without a scratch. One of the few, I can tell you. The rest of my time for the past ten years has been spent here in the West, hunting. No, not hunting for game, though I’ve seen my share of that, too. Hunting a man. My brother — younger brother, Tom.

“ You see, Tom and I had always been chums

when we were youngsters. I was four years the older, but Tom grew up early — bigger than I was after he was fifteen. A bit wild, Tom, but square as a die and a good sport. Took his medicine like a man and paid his way in every pinch. But wild, yes, wild as they make 'em. Partly my fault, because I indulged him; covered up his scrapes after he'd got out of them by himself. There wasn't anything I wouldn't have done for him.

" Nothing one-sided about it, either. I won't soon forget that day at Aldersly when he paid with a broken leg for the risk that should have been mine. Rotten timbers caved in in an old mine we were exploring. He was nineteen then, the year before he put on his country's uniform. India service, five years of it. Earned promotion and got it, then lost it through a wild prank that pretty near started a native war.

" Came back home then, same old Tom, and we went in business together. Four years of that, and then we fell in love with the same girl. Dear old sentimental Tommy! Got the notion that the girl cared for me — so he cleared

out to give me a full chance at winning her!

“ Maybe I had the idea that I was the lucky fellow, too, but it was just the other way around. She’s still hoping that Tom will come back. He wrote me regularly up to the close of the war but he never stayed long enough in one place to get any of my letters. I wrote him often enough, goodness knows, but the letters all came back.

“ Just before the war I came to the States to trail him, and as soon as I took off the uniform I was at it again. I’m counted a good hunter, but I have been a miserable failure at the only game I ever really wanted to run down. Just before I met up with you I struck the freshest trail I have ever found, and it was six months old. We’ve been criss-crossing this neck of the woods, you and I, for over a month now, and not a sign did I find till to-day.”

“ Gee whizz!” I exclaimed. “ Where? Tartel?”

“ Not exactly. I don’t really know that it’s a clew at all. Probably not, but it’s the closest I’ve come to one in such a long while that I’ve

tried to make myself believe that it's a real one."

"Where'd you find it, if not at Tartel?"

"Here in the hills. Ever hear of a claim-jumping antelope by the name of Rawlins—Thatch Rawlins? Hardly thought so. Been everything, I guess; cattle rustler, whiskey runner, bootlegger, card sharp and miner. A miner when his other jobs got too hot for him. I pulled him out of a tight hole once, for which I ought to be strung up by the thumbs, but the old sinner's got a soft spot for me.

"He's out prospecting again; shot a man up at Mineral City and had to clear out. This time it's really different. He's prospecting for a mine that's already located. No, I'm not trying to talk in riddles. I'll explain.

"Once in a while even a bad man does a good deed. According to Thatch's story he got into this trouble at Mineral City over a chap called Shorty Winters. Shorty is quite a character. Touched, you know; simple in way, but shrewd enough to get along. Folks take a special delight in making game of the poor old

duffer, and they keep him imagining he's in all sorts of trouble. They'll tell him that he's hurt somebody's feelings — some bad man of the town — and that he's looking for Shorty and will shoot to kill on sight. Then Shorty legs it home fast as he can go and gets out an old horse-pistol that's as long as your arm. Then the whole town has a laugh.

“ The gun hasn’t been fired in twenty years, so far as anybody knows. The town joker offered Shorty a dollar if he’d shoot the old cannon. Shorty said he would do it for the dollar, and then gave it back with another dollar to boot if the joker’d stand in front of the muzzle when he pulled the trigger.

“ I’m telling you all this so you’ll know just how to take the story that Rawlins told me. According to Rawlins, here it is:

“ Somebody started the yarn that Shorty was a miser and had a lot of money hidden away. Shorty seemed to take great pride in his new title and reputation. Then one night, to get all the juice out of the joke, four miners, just in and aching for fun, put masks over their faces

and went to Shorty's cabin where they pretended to hold him up. Half the town was outside the cabin to be in on the sport.

"It got too realistic when one of the men, a bit the worse for liquor, took a red-hot poker and slapped it sizzling on Shorty's bare arm. 'That,' said Rawlins, 'was when I took a hand. The miner drawed on me but I was too quick fer him. Howsomever, he had the crowd with him an' I figgered it was safer to light out o' town. Which I done.'

"He must have gone in a hurry, because he left with the clothes on his back and nothing else. Somehow Shorty found where he was hiding out and brought Rawlins his belongings, which wasn't such a much, judging by what I saw about two hours ago. But Shorty came out to him, that's the big point, and they sat around the fire and chinned awhile.

"Here's the way Thatch told it:

"'We was settin' thar an' not sayin' much o' nothin' an' all of a sudden Shorty says, says he, 'Thatch, you been a good friend to me, and good friends allus gits paid back.'"

“““ Chuck it, Shorty, I never did like that big stiff nohow,” says I.””

“““ You don’t fool me none,” says Shorty, “ He’d a plugged you shore ef you hadn’t beat him on the draw. I wuz a good friend to a feller onct, an’ look what he gi’n me.””

“‘ An’ the poor locoed nut pulls a nugget out o’ his pocket as big as a hen’s egg. “ Where in thunder did you git that, and who wuz he anyhow?” I asks him.

“‘ Shorty grins silly, like he does when he’s a lot smarter than you think, and sez, “ He told me; alright. I know his name, an’ where his mine is an’ everything. An’ it aint fur off, neither.””

“‘ An’ then he tells me a long story about how some locoed miner what has a touch o’ camp fever or a broken leg, I couldn’t make out just which or both, come to his shack to be took in an’ saved from the wolves or the cold or just plain starvation. You know how ramblin’ Shorty talks when he gets goin’. Anyhow, the poor galoot was clean out o’ his head an’ tol’ all his secrets, bein’ just then about as crazy as poor Shorty is mostly.

“‘‘ And after tellin’ all about a bone-nanzy mine he’s prospected, when his fever’s at its worst and he’s just a ravin’ loony, he slips away while Shorty’s snoozin’—slips out at night when it’s way below zero an’ then some.

“‘‘ After he’s gone Shorty finds a chart that shows where the mine’s located, and he’d give up that chart, to me or anybody else, the same time he gives up his right eye.’’

“ That,” concluded Jim, “ was where Rawlins told his first lie, because he’d never go out looking for that mine without knowing exactly where it was. Thatch is different from the drunken miner that he shot, in just one way — he wouldn’t use a red-hot poker unless he was after something.”

“ Just where do you see any clew in all this? ” I asked.

“ It’s what I found out afterwards, by a few careless questions. If Shorty’s description is worth anything, that ’locoed miner was my brother Tom. Had a scar on his upper arm, he said, and wore a peculiar shaped ring. Of course Shorty’s not all there, as far as that goes, and

Rawlins is not to be trusted farther'n you can throw a locomotive by the drawbar. On the other hand, neither one could have any object in stringing me, because I managed not to show any special interest in the story. As far as the story goes, Rawlins believes there's something in it because he's out here running it down."

"It does sound promising," I admitted, "but you never can tell. You didn't talk to Shorty himself — "

"No," interrupted Jim explosively, "but I'm going to. By cutting across to Silver Spring I can get a train to a point where ten miles by stage will take me to Mineral City. Here I'll look up Shorty, casual like, and try to get some more information out of the old coot. Mineral City is a county seat and I aim to look up the records and see if anyone by the name of Tom Raily has filed on a claim. I figger Tom would be too wise to do much mining without filing on his claim if 'twas worth filing. I have wasted enough time talking to you, you jabberwock. Think you can take care of the camp while I'm

gone? Take me two days and the next night to make it, I expect."

"I'll try to," I answered, "if you'll tell me what time to put the beans to soak, when to wind the clock and where to hang the dishrag between usings. Going to take a bite with you?"

"Nope. I'll be at Silver Spring by moonrise to-night, and I'll have breakfast in Mineral City. There's just one thing for you to look out for—" he paused as if doubtful whether to utter the warning.

"Don't tell me if you think it'll scare me."

"I wish I could scare you into being careful. The one thing is — Thatch Rawlins."

## CHAPTER III

### THATCH RAWLINS CALLS

After Big Jim was gone I realized that I had failed to ask two important questions. Where had he met Rawlins, and which way was he headed? Probably in my direction, I reasoned, or Jim would hardly have thought it worth while to warn me against Thatch.

I walked over to the edge of the little highland plain in the center of which our camp was pitched, and watched Jim out of sight in the gullies that twisted and turned ever lower to the southward. Then I went back and sitting down on a log, watched the sun climb behind the mountains. Our camp was peculiar in that respect; the sun did not go down, but moved out of sight sideways, at the very last appearing to rise a little along the slope of the western ridge.

I had not long to enjoy the beautiful sight.

I had not been sitting there over ten minutes when I heard a hearty "Hello!" from the top of the trail which Jim had just taken on his way down.

"Must have passed Jim on the way," I said to myself, at the same time answering the hail.

"Light, stranger, and rest your horse," I invited.

"Don't keer if I do," heartily. "It's some climb up here. Quite some camp you have. All by your lone?"

"I'm not alone," I hastened to say, remembering the thought I had had a moment before and realizing that the stranger did not want me to know he had passed Jim.

The stranger did not give me much time for thought, and his tongue rattled on:

"Got a buddy, eh? It's best, up here in the hills. Too many things can happen to a feller when he can't get help. I see you've had yer chuck. Care if I roast a young squirrel over yer coals? Maybe you could coax up enough appetite to eat a saddle with me. Got a drap o' coffee left, I see. Well, that'll save me unpackin' my

tin. I'll jist swing off my pack an' let the horse pick 'round."

"Hunting?" I asked innocently.

"Partly. Got a party 'bout forty miles farther west that I'm goin' to guide. Greenhorns from the city. I expect to git many's the good laugh out o' them, besides good pay fer my time. Jack Lewis don't work fer fun."

"My name's Tod Vance, Mr. Lewis—"

"*Mister* Lewis! Sufferin' snakes! Jack, buddy, Jack, if we're goin' to be friends. I ain't hearn the last part o' my name for so long I've almost fergot it's Raw—Lewis," he amended hastily, eying me sharply to see if the slip had made any impression.

I was not to be trapped. "Rawlewis," I remarked casually. "It's an unusual name."

"Just Lewis," he said easily. "The 'Raw' part is my middle name—short for Rollins."

"He's clever," I remarked to myself. "He can invent lies faster than a dog can trot." Then, just for the fun of seeing how far the old scamp would go, I asked:

"Maybe you know my pal; he's been around

these parts right smart — Jim Raily? ”

“ Raily — Raily,” shaking his head thoughtfully. “ The name does sound sort o’ familiar. Must ’a’ heard o’ him, all right, though I don’t rickolect runnin’ into him. How old a man would you say he was? ”

“ Past forty, a pretty solid chunk of a man. A full inch taller than I am and twenty pounds heavier. Always wears a brown woolen shirt, open at the neck, and never has his sleeves down. Never saw him with a coat on or without a tie.”

“ Yer tally ’minds me of the bills they posted fer the man wanted fer stealin’ Blind Pete’s mare. Had a toe missin’ on his right foot. Thousand dollars reward, dead or alive. He’s quick on the draw, so shoot first and ask questions afterward. Goin’ barefoot was healthy in them parts fer a considerable time.”

“ Jim’s gone to town,” I volunteered.

“ Tartel? ” he asked casually.

“ No, Silver Spring.” This was at least half-true, since he would pass through Silver Spring on his way to Mineral City.

“ Silver Spring? What in thunder he want to

go to Silver Spring fer? It's half ag'in as fur, an' the trail's all up an' down."

"I think he wanted to mail a letter," I suggested. "There's no railorad at Tartel, and he could just make it to the train at Silver Spring. The letter was awfully important, he said."

"Huh!" grunted Rawlins, and his tone sounded somewhat uneasy to me. "Well, it's gittin' dark fast. Reckon I'll shake out a blanket and roll in. I've got to be a-goin' by sun-up cause my party ain't goin' to wait long on me an' I'm a day late now. Been any fu'ther west into the mountains than here?"

"No — far as I've gone. Oh, I crossed the gully yonder to-day, but that's all."

"Has yore pardner been any fu'ther?"

"Not this trip. Why, is there good hunting?"

"Not 'less you go t'other side the hills, and that's a hard stretch o'goin'. If I was you I'd swing south. Movin' on to-morrow?"

"No, not till Jim gets back."

The minute it was out I realized what I had said. It was too dark now to see Rawlins' eyes, and I could not tell whether he had noted

my slip or not. He was silent for a long time and then his remark was harmless enough.

“Ever do any prospectin’? ”

“Wouldn’t know pay dirt from potato peelings.”

“I’ve mined some. Your pardner ever say anything about diggin’? Strikes me I used to know a creek panner by the name of Raily. Can’t say as his name was Jim, though.”

“No, I don’t know that he ever did; never has told me about it, at least.”

That was all. The camp was quiet for the next few minutes, until a hearty roar from the blankets on the other side of the fire told me that Rawlins was asleep and snoring with the muffler wide open. After debating the matter a moment I decided that it would be safe enough for me to go to sleep. Just before I dozed off I came to another conclusion. Big Jim had told me to look out for Rawlins. I would do just that. And the best way to do it was to stay as close to Rawlins as possible. I would follow his trail.

The next thing I knew it was morning, and

broad daylight at that. I had slept a full hour beyond my usual time. The reason for this was clear enough. A corner of my blanket had fallen across my face and screened me from the wakening rays of the sun.

“It *might* have just dropped there,” I said half aloud as I saw that my visitor had already departed. “It might, but I doubt it. Our clever friend probably wanted to be sure that I got my beauty sleep, and he his get-away. Well, we’ll soon see if Big Jim’s lessons in trailing have been worth anything. A bite to eat and then we’ll be off.”

A few slices of bacon, water dough fried in the bacon grease, a cup of black coffee, and I was ready to hit the trail. I set off, my rifle over my shoulder. As I reached the place where the hoofmarks led into the ravine I happened to think of Big Jim and his return to an unguarded camp. “Better leave a note,” I decided. So I hastily returned and scribbled the following note:

“Dear Jim: Rawlins was here and told such a pack of lies that I felt I ought to follow him.

He tumbled to the fact that you were going to Mineral City. You must have passed him soon after leaving camp, because he was here within a few minutes. I think he suspects that you went there on account of the mine. At any rate I'm going to try to trail him and find out where the mine is located. You ought to be able to follow me without any trouble, as I'll leave plenty of tracks."

"The Jabberwock."

I laid this under the coffee pot, that being the first place Jim would come, and once more I took up the trail. It led, plain as the nose on a man's face, straight down the slope, but once at the bed of the stream it was not so easy to follow. I felt sure that Rawlins had crossed to the other side, so at the first easy place I plunged in and splashed across. I followed the bank downstream for a hundred yards, because I knew he could never have forced his horse against that current.

At last I was rewarded. On the top of a flat rock there was still a little pool of water, sure sign that he had come out there. I had to go

up the slope some distance before I found further trace, as the side of the ravine here was almost bare rock. A patch of moss yielded the faint mark of a hoof, and a little farther on there were two prints close enough together to give me his direction.

From then on I made better time; in fact I felt sure I was traveling as fast as Rawlins, for this was poor country for a horse and many places that I could clamber over forced his mount to go around. Swinging southward, the trail led toward the crest of the ridge. Whether Rawlins knew of my cliff or not, he was going to avoid it, though it was possible he would hit even worse climbing by his route.

He showed no great desire to quit the ridge and mile after mile the hoofprints led along until the sun was almost straight overhead and I was beginning to feel the heat. Likewise my stomach was beginning to protest a little, so I decided to "eat a rest," as Jim used to call it.

I was a bit dubious about building a fire, but Jim had instructed me thoroughly in the art of fire building, and as there were plenty of dry

sticks to be had, I flattered myself that I would be able to build a smokeless blaze and broil a few strips of bacon without anyone a hundred feet away being the wiser. That and a little bread served me for dinner. After I had washed it down with a few deep gulps of crystal-clear water from a spring that gurgled out from under a big rock, I decided to rest for half an hour. The trail had been growing fresher and fresher and I knew that I had been gaining on Rawlins.

Refreshed by my short rest, I took up the trail with renewed vigor, so much so that just before sunset, as I rounded the mouth of a steep-sided ravine and swung out onto the base of a grassy slope, I saw a horse and rider just dipping out of view on the upper edge.

“I’ll stop here till dark,” I decided. “There’s probably a belt of timber beyond this grassy slope and he’ll camp for the night just inside its shelter. Back in the ravine I can chance a shot with one of my shorts and maybe pop over a bite of fresh meat for supper. Then when it’s good and dark I’ll see if I can slip up a little nearer to my friend, Mr. Jack Raw-Lewis.”

It was already growing dark in the shadows of the ravine and it was fortunate for me that the chattering of a squirrel soon put an end to my hurried hunt. It was an easy shot, and he came tumbling down almost at my feet. He was young and fat, so I felt well satisfied with my hunt.

Browned over the coals of a tiny fire, it was a dainty morsel, especially to an appetite sharpened by mountain air and a hard day in the open. I saved a few bits for breakfast, because it was hardly likely that I would dare risk a fire at a time when the smoke might betray me.

“He’ll go hard to-morrow,” I concluded, “because in all probability he figures to reach the place by dark, and he hasn’t made many miles forward to-day, having to follow the ravines so much. We’ll be getting into smoother country and his horse can set a pace I’ll have a hard time matching unless we get an even start.”

With that I picked up my scanty equipment, clambered over the rocks at the mouth of the ravine and squatted down to wait until the stars

would come out and I could set my course by their light. One by one they twinkled out as the rosy light of the sun faded from the sky. A cleft in the ridge had marked the spot where I had last seen Rawlins; the Big Dipper hung low in the sky. The last star in the handle was my guide.

Despite the brightness of the stars it was a dark night, and without my guide point, trailing would have been impossible. In fact, I forgot all about the trail, trusting that when the crest of the ridge was reached there would be the flicker of a camp fire to help me along. Failing that, I would have to await the morning.

Two good hours I toiled upward, cheered by the hope that luck would be with me as to the camp fire. I was not so fortunate. The ridge proved to be a bare, stony slope, dipping sharply to the northwest and carrying no sign of any shelter. Looming bulkily out of the darkness was the next ridge, crowned with a forest of spruce that cast a deeper black than sky or the slope below. I had no doubt that somewhere within its shadows rested my quarry.

I pondered the advisability of risking the climb down and up again in the dark. "It would take me an hour at least," I argued, "maybe two. By that time his fire would have died down to coals and ashes, and I couldn't see it a dozen feet away. Besides, I don't know that he crossed the cut here. He might have followed the ridge on up for another mile or so. If I cross, it means a long scout up and down in the morning, with a chance that I've missed him entirely; while if I stay here I'll have a fine chance of seeing his breakfast smoke."

This reasoning seemed logical, but despite this I finally decided to take the chance and cross over at once. It was not so easy after the first quarter mile. The slopes were gradual enough, but there were outcroppings of rock that proved mighty difficult in the dark. When I was half way down I began to repent having started. I had no guide for direction save instinct, the Dipper being hidden behind the opposite ridge, and the way was so broken that half the time I was not sure whether I was going uphill or down. Twice I found myself heading straight

into the base of a cliff. It was with great relief that I felt my feet plunge into a pool of water, knowing that I had reached the bottom of the slope. I plunged my face gratefully into its cool depths, satisfied with my efforts. My satisfaction was short-lived. A sudden thought struck me: What would a man do at the end of a hard day, with another long day before him, if he came to a stream of water? Would he pass on or would he make camp there so his horse could drink his fill before taking up the hard grind again in the morning?

That might depend, of course, upon what lay at the top of the next slope. I did not know; perhaps Rawlins did. Daylight would come late down here, much later than on top the ridge, and with me down below and Rawlins above—well, it meant an hour's start on me, not counting the time it would take for the climb and picking up the trail again.

When I had been above, everything seemed to argue against my starting, now that I was below, everything seemed to tell me to go on—everything but my tired muscles. With a sigh

I waded across the tiny stream, shallow here where a rocky pocket had widened the stream to a quiet pool. With another sigh I set myself to start up the slope. With the first sloshy step I came to an abrupt halt.

“I say, Vance,” came a quiet voice from the darkness, “drop your pack and step this way. Yes, and drop your gun, too. I’ve got a bead on you. That’s the ticket. Now, if you don’t mind, perhaps you’ll explain why you’ve been follerling me all day, and what fer that swell pardner of yours lit out so sudden to Mineral City! ”

## CHAPTER IV

### IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY

My first feeling was one of humiliation. To think that I had been so proud of my trailing and had built so high on what I would tell Big Jim on his return. Now here I was, caught! Not only that, but I had a strong feeling that Rawlins had known all along that I had been following him. His next words told me that this was true.

“Thought you was playin’ me fer a greenie, eh? Me jest tollin’ you on till I got yuh so fur away from camp thet you’d be good an’ lost! What kind o’ gun do you carry on yer hip? ”

He “fanned” me, as they say out there, finding nothing but my big pocket knife. “Huh,” he grunted. “Harmless as a two-year-old, an’ ‘bout as smart. You’ll have to git up ’arlier in the mornin’ to catch Thatch Rawlins. Yes, I’m Thatch Rawlins, as you well know, ye little snoop! ”

"Maybe if you hadn't lied to me I wouldn't have snooped," I returned. I had been thinking while he was talking and had decided on the line I would take. "Big Jim told me about meeting you, so I knew you were Rawlins, and I figured you wouldn't have lied to me about that unless you had something to hide. So, Jim being away, I decided to follow you and find out what that something was."

"That don't pull the wool none over my eyes neither, Bud. Ef Big Jim tol' you who I was he tol' you what I was here fur. Ef you hadn't acted so durn innercent I mightn't 'a' been so suspicious. So Big Jim went to Mineral City to see ef that claim had been recorded, an' lef' you to foller me up an' see whar it's located so you could slip in on me an' grab it off. Well, young feller, ef you find it after I git through with you, yore a good-un, that's all."

"All right," I laughed. "Some people are so wise they make fools of themselves. You've told me more in two minutes than I've found out in a whole day of following you. So that was why you sneaked away so carefully? "

"Young feller, ef you ever take to playin' poker I'd like you fer a pardner. Not that there's much use in bluffin' a four-card flush after yore hand's been called. I've got you dead to rights and you might as well lay down your cards an' pass over the chips."

"Oh, all right," I answered with pretended disgust. "Have it your own way."

"I expect to. Maybe you'll be satisfied now to beat it back to yore dude camp. How 'bout it? Ef I turn you loose will you go on back an' keep yore fool nose in yore own bus'ness? "

"Reckon I'll have to."

"Reckon you would ef I'd chance you, which I don't aim to do. That baby face o' yourn hain't to be trusted any more'n a rattlesnake what's had its rattles shot off. I'll just cinch you up till mornin' and then we'll see what we'll see."

This he proceeded to do, the cinching being accomplished with a good deal of unnecessary roughness. He was an expert in the art of roping a man, and his knots were a marvel of simplicity and effectiveness. When you loosened

one you tightened another. I found this out a very few minutes after his snoring told me that he had gone to sleep.

I soon followed suit; no use losing sleep over a useless struggle. In the morning — well, as Rawlins had said, we would see what we would see.

Long before daylight my captor was astir. He made coffee, flapjacks and fried bacon. He untied my hands so I could eat and as soon as the meal was over, tied them up again and released my feet.

“There,” he said grimly. “Any time you want to run off, go to it. You’ll starve to death long afore you find yore camp. Which direction does it lay, would you say?”

I pointed just opposite to where I really thought.

“Durn!” said Rawlins.

I was startled. His exclamation had sounded so genuine that I felt sure I had pointed straight toward camp, and if that was true, then I was completely turned around. I soon had cause for further alarm.

“ I’ll soon take ye, young feller, to whar you won’t know east from straight-up. Start hikin’.”

At the start Rawlins walked, for his horse seemed none too certain of his footing. We first climbed straight up the side of the ravine, then followed the ridge for better than two miles to a place where it forked. We followed the left-hand fork and began to edge off the ridge down what I took to be the northern slope. From then on it was a case of plunge and scramble, climb and slide, until my head was in a whirl from trying to keep my directions. To make matters worse for me, the sky was a mass of solid gray, with the sun completely blanketed from sight. Rawlins grinned maliciously as he turned once and caught me scanning the sky.

“ Better make a mark up there, Bud, ‘cause the ol’ sun-ball ain’t goin’ to show to-day. I’ve got a special arrangement with the weather man; we’re in cahoots. Gettin’ tired? ” as I paused after a particularly steep scramble.

“ Not so’s you could notice it. I can follow wherever you lead.”

“ Yep, I reckon you kin,” he snorted. “ Yore

purty well favored as to legs. Mind me of Jed Sparks. Had a kid as long-legged as Jed himself. 'What you goin' to make of him, Jed?' I ast him. 'Singer, I reckon,' he says. 'He's got legs like a lark.'" Thatch laughed loud at his own story.

"You must have good wind," I remarked sourly, "to waste it cackling over a punk story like that. A hen wouldn't cackle that loud over laying an egg. And the egg would be *fresh*."

"So're you," grunted Rawlins. "One more crack like that an' I'll baste ye over the head. Get along now; I'll have no more o' this laggin' behind."

We traveled on, Rawlins in surly silence, I chattering like a magpie. I took a malicious delight in aggravating the man, and I soon saw that my nimble tongue worried him. We had covered a good many miles when Rawlins called a halt with the caustic remark, "Maybe you can shut up while you eat. They ain't no other way o' stoppin' yore fool mouth. You got as many words as a dictionary, an' they foller one another with jest about as much sense."

That silenced me for a little. "Ef it's cloudy to-night," said Rawlins as he noisily swallowed his last gulp of coffee and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, "I'll turn you loose, so you better be gettin' yore bearin's."

Thereupon he picked up his traps and made ready to break camp. Without a backward look to see if I was following, he took hold of his horse's bridle reins and started off. More from force of habit than anything else, I followed along close behind. I ceased my chattering, having concluded to follow his advice and get my bearings. Not, however, with the idea of getting back to camp, but to determine if possible which way he was heading.

I had arrived at the conclusion that the first few miles had been for my special benefit, all twists and turns. The same would be true just before he set me adrift. Right now, I reasoned, he would be following his true course, in the direction of the mine. If I could only locate two or three landmarks I ought to be able to prove the correctness of my conclusions as well as to figure out just about where the mine lay.

Landmarks were not so easy to find. Every ridge looked much like its neighbors to east and west, north and south, though I had not the slightest idea which direction was which. By noting which ravines seemed darkest, and which slopes showed moss, I finally decided that we were following the backbone of a ridge system that led generally to the northwest, and that our line of travel was from the blue-gray peak just barely seen in the misty sky behind us, toward the cleft in the twin peaks perhaps fifty miles ahead. Indeed, I guessed that Rawlins' trail would pass between those two giants, never dreaming that they lay thirty miles apart, the one on the right being all of fifteen miles beyond the other.

The afternoon wore along. It must have been about four o'clock when I noticed that the country was changing in character. The peaks were smaller and rounder, standing like a lot of warts on a toad's back. We climbed none of them but wound in and out along their bases, in some cases nearly circling them. An hour of this travel left me dizzy with trying to recall

which way we had come or whether I had seen this particular hill before.

Then we came to a wide plateau, miles across and bordered all around by low hills like those we had just come through. Here Rawlins came to a halt.

"All right, Bud," he said casually, "I guess here's whar you an' me parts comp'ny. Kind o' hate to lose yore sassiety, too, I does, 'cause you shore do shorten the way with that tongue o' yourn. But the best o' friends must part, an' we'd best split afore we git too friendly. Le's see — guess I can spare you a hunk o' my bacon an' a pound o' flour. You got matches an' that toad-stabber o' yourn, so you needn't go hungry long ef you make tracks straight fur camp — which," he warned with a sudden change of tone, "I'm advisin' you to do. After sun-up to-morrer it won't be healthy fur you in these parts."

"Going to let me have my gun?" I asked as carelessly as I could.

"Gun? Well, you won't hardly need it much. It'd just be a load fur you to carry, bein's you

ain't no shells fur it. Too bad you lost all of 'em climbin' up an' down these pesky hills and hollers," he remarked with mock sympathy. "I don't aim to keep yore cannon, an' when I get back to Mineral City I'll leave it fur you, leave it with Shorty Winters, ef you know who I mean."

"Surely you're not going to — to rout me out without a gun."

"Shorely am. An' you'd better git goin'. Yore trail lays straight across this flat, an' I'll be watchin' here to see that you hit her on the line. That leetle hill next to the yaller-lookin' one is yore guide. You kin make it afore plumb dark, an' you'd better. Wait there till mornin', an' hike straight into the sun. An' don't turn around," he finished sourly. "I'm lettin' you off durn easy this time!"

"I'll say," I snorted. "You're as tender-hearted as a turtle dove."

"Git goin'!"

"Be sure to write me," I mocked. "If you haven't time for a real letter, a picture postcard will do. And any time you're in my town, drop

in and meet my friends. I'm sure the sheriff will be glad to meet you — again."

"Git!"

"Any time you want a letter of recommendation for any position of trust don't fail to call on me."

"Young feller, I don't aim to mistreat you none, anybody as green as you are oughta' be pertected from their own foolishness. But I ain't no wet nurse, so ef you don't want a good old-fashioned spankin', fur the last time — *git!*

The tone of that last "git" sounded entirely too forceful to be ignored. Besides, if the plan I had in mind was to be successful I had no time to lose.

I had noted one thing about that "flat" which apparently had escaped the keen eyes of Rawlins. Somewhere near its center, some five miles away, was a thin green line. It meant one of two things; a watercourse or a valley. It extended all the way across the plain, entering the hills at the right, about a quarter of the circle from where I started.

It would be fairly dark by the time I reached

the line of green, too dark for Rawlins to see me if he were still watching, which I very much doubted. I had a notion that before I had gone a half mile he would be well on his way, swinging north and west, skirting the edge of the flat. If I had not miscalculated I ought to cross his trail not long after I entered the hills.

If I did cross his trail—well, Thatch Rawlins had not seen the last of me, not by a long shot. He had my rifle, my most prized possession. It was a present from Big Jim and so long as he had that I would follow him, though I lost his trail a hundred times.

With these thoughts running through my mind I trudged along, never once looking back. The walking was easy enough. The ground was covered with a sparse growth of tough, wiry grass, with mountain daisies here and there and an occasional clump of low bush. The soil was very thin and poor, and no big trees could find a living.

The sun must have set, for all of a sudden the gray was gone and darkness seemed to drop

over me like a greenhorn's tent when rain pulls the ropes on him. I still had a mile to go, or so I judged, with little chance of losing my way for a while, at least. A little patch of sky had cleared and now a big star shone out to guide me.

There was one thing I would have to decide when I reached my line of green, and upon my decision depended the success of all my plans. Should I turn to the right or to the left? It was easy enough to say Rawlins was traveling north and west. Which was north and which was west? If the sky would only clear a little more I could easily get my directions from the stars, but even now my little patch was closing in and my lone star shone mistily through the clouds.

There was only one way to figure it out, and that was by reading my former captor's mind. My experience in such things was limited, but Big Jim had given me the benefit of his keen mind and passed on a few of the lessons he had learned by hard knocks. One remark he had made will always stick with me:

“ Some people get so much in the habit of being crooked that they can’t go straight when they want to. Their minds just won’t track. They’re the easiest to figure out. Just go opposite to the straight way and nine times in ten you’ve guessed them right.”

This helped me to decide my problem. I felt sure Rawlins could not resist the chance for a last little joke at my expense. What was it he had said? “ Your trail lays straight across this flat \* \* \* wait till mornin’ and hike straight into the sun.”

“ Hike straight into the sun!” And that, I hadn’t the slightest doubt, meant hiking straight back across the flat the way I had come.

In other words, Rawlins was sending me farther west. If so, then north would lie at my right hand, and by turning to the right I would soon cross his trail again and, I hoped, could square my account with him.

About the time I reached this conclusion I put a sudden stop to my mind-wanderings by falling flat across a log covered with trailing vines. The finding of that log was a welcome

discovery, even if the manner of finding it was none too pleasant.

Rubbing my bumps and bruises, I rose and stumbled forward. I would soon know which of my two guesses was correct — whether this was a dry valley or the bed of a mountain stream. I found I was half right each way. There had been a stream, but all that was left of it now was a few scattered pools. However, they served to guide me on my course, and turning to the right I began an alternate wading and tramping that carried me steadily toward the hills.

I tried to drink some of the water, but it was thick with slime and bitter with the roots of the trees that stood about the pools. I would have to go thirsty until daylight came to show me where good water was to be found.

Morning, too, would show me something else. Rawlins' trail, perhaps, but before that I expected to learn whether he had traveled in the night. If he had not it would mean a wait of several hours till he should pass.

It might have been two hours that I traveled

forward, wet to the waist most of the time, when I realized that the course of my little streams of pools was changing. In the first place, the pools were growing deeper and closer together, with little rivulets a few feet wide connecting them. In the gloom I could see that the banks were higher, steeper, and the water seemed to be getting colder.

“Getting close to the hills,” I decided. “Have to stop soon and make camp till daylight.”

Came a bend in the course and the first step off-shore brought me into water up to my arm-pits. “Jerusalemmy!” I exclaimed. “No-body’s pinned any medals on me for swimming, and I’m afraid I’ll take cold if I get my hair wet. Maybe I’d better try the shore trail for a while.”

It was no easy task. At the right I found a steep rocky bank coming right down to the water’s edge. On the left it was a little easier. The rocks were there, but they sloped a little. “One more push and I’ll make the top, then I’ll stop there till the old sun-ball tells me a little more about this country.”

I was due for a surprise. Halfway up the slope I suddenly realized that I had stepped into a well worn path. "Now what in thunder's been using this route to water?" I asked myself. "Must have used it a long time or else there's a lot of them using it. I wouldn't exactly like to meet a bear just n—"

The thought was never finished, for just then I caught a sound, faint and far off, but unmistakably different from the usual noises of the night. I stepped noiselessly off the trail, though not far, for I dared not take the chance of starting a loose stone crashing down the mountain-side. Holding my breath I waited, straining my ear to catch the slightest sound.

The sound was drawing nearer, louder. Then it became a steady beat, like an army marching — no, like a drove of cattle passing along a hard road.

Cattle here? In a flash came another thought. Sheep, mountain sheep! I thought of the big buck I had seen there on the mountain top, and involuntarily stepped back another pace.

Then out of the gloom they came, gray, indis-

tinct shapes, marching single file. I did not count them; there might have been thirty. Silent save for their shuffling, clicking hoofs, they passed by.

All but one. That one paused opposite me. Paused and raised his head, sniffing the wind.

Did you ever go camping and wake up in the night feeling cold and reach down to pull up the covers — and your right hand clasp the clammy folds of a snake coiled on your bed?

Then you know something of the feeling that shot through me when that last member of the herd, halting opposite my hiding place, threw back his head and sent forth on the night air the most blood-curdling sound I have ever heard.

Not a howl exactly, though it was loud enough to be called that. More like a growl, only less throaty. In its harsh notes was a threat that sent my blood running cold and raised the hair on my head. No sheep, that! But what?

The answer was not long in coming. Apparently satisfied that his challenge would not be answered, the beast lowered his head, gave a complacent half-growl, half-bark, and ambled

along after the sheep, who had quickened their footsteps at his first nerve-tingling challenge.

“By cracky!” I exclaimed aloud, but guardedly, “nothing but a dog ever made a sound like that. What would a dog be doing here? And following a herd of bighorn sheep!”

## CHAPTER V

### TRAILING THE CLAIM-JUMPER

It is strange what a fellow will think about when he can't go to sleep. Lying still at night we either forget our troubles or we magnify them. Following my experience along the narrow trail, I had flopped my blankets on the top of the hill alongside the trail. Thoughts of the happenings of the past two days flashed through my mind, driving all sleep away. For the most part my thoughts were of the strange sight I had just witnessed.

I could not keep from wondering about the relationship of the dog to that bunch of bighorns he had been following. Was he stalking them or herding them? Was he following them for his dinner, or to keep them from making dinner for some other stalker of the wild? At his growl I had heard the bighorns scurrying away, but that told me nothing. They would

have scattered if his outburst had been their first warning of his presence, just as they would had his wierd growl told them of the presence of some other enemy.

The only real evidence I had was that three-cornered fight between the big buck, the mountain lion and the dog. Yet what was the dog's role there? It was a case of trying to answer one question by asking another one. It was too much for me, and for the thousandth time I shut my eyes and tried to go to sleep. My last thought before sleep finally came was the resolve that when the trail of Rawlins was ended I would take up another trail — the trail of the dog that followed the bighorns.

At the first peek of the sun — and it comes early in the mountains — I was awake and alert for any sign of my late captor. I decided that a bite of breakfast would not come amiss before I took up the trail, and building a careful fire, I broiled a few thick strips of bacon. No smoke could have betrayed me to a watchful enemy, and in spite of my recent humiliating defeat at the hands of Rawlins I congratulated

myself that I was quickly learning the ways of the wild.

As I munched my scanty fare I looked about to get the lay of the land. I found that my hill was really a broken-backed ridge, and that I was on the first and lower hump. A slight dip lay between me and the peak of the system. Once there I could get a view of a wide stretch of country, just the section I expected Rawlins to pass through, and I decided that my first move would be the scaling of that peak.

It proved to be more of a task than I expected, for the dip between the two peaks turned out to be more chasm than ravine, and the first glimpse at its dizzy walls filled me with dismay. Perhaps two hundred feet deep, its sides were almost straight up and down. A slight fault a little to the right gave me hopes that there might be a chance for a descent, so I started in that direction. The going was pretty rough and as I scrambled along I had a feeling I was not alone in this wilderness of boulders and stunted pines. There was the slightest break in the silence of the hills, and

while I could not put a name to it, I sensed it keenly.

On rounding a great rock that stood out like a wart on the slope, I looked down into the cut where ran a tiny stream of silvery water, and grazing beside it was the herd of bighorns that had passed me on the trail the night before.

I looked about for the dog that had given me such a scare by his fiendish howl, but he was nowhere in sight. Neither was the big buck. I had a good view of the rest of the herd, all ewes and young rams, with a few baby sheep shouldering against the sides of their mothers.

Then I heard a bleat, just around the bend of the little brook, and in an instant all the sheep had disappeared in that direction. I hurried forward, hoping to catch another sight of them and the big buck.

I did better than that. I found myself at the top of the fault I had noticed, a narrow, jagged fissure that split all the way to the bottom. Here I had a good view down its clean-cut sides. What I saw was well worth a look, though it took me several minutes to grasp its meaning.

Standing in the narrow pathway, with his back to me, was my friend of the night before. I could see him distinctly, standing there like a statue, and there was no mistaking his breed.

He was a shepherd dog, a splendid specimen, one of the biggest I had ever seen. Certainly he was the finest figure of a dog I ever ran across, any breed or type. His tail was carried high and the scruff of his neck stood up, a challenge to any and all to attack him at their peril.

Facing him was the big buck, also on guard. Apparently he was none the worse for his encounter with the mountain lion, and his bearing was almost majestic. He had a magnificent pair of horns, with great coils and sword-like points. Just now he was plainly aroused; his head held high and his nostrils flaring.

For a full five minutes the tableau continued, and all the while I was trying to figure out what it was all about. The first move told me plainly enough. It was another case of the French at Verdun; the dog was saying: "They shall not pass."

The big buck had a different mind. He was determined to lead his flock up the steep path. Why should the dog wish to prevent it? A wild guess flashed through my mind: The dog knew my location and was protecting the sheep from me.

The role of protector was no easy one, as I was soon to see. The big buck lowered his head and sprang forward, making a quick dart aside as he tried to come in past the snapping jaws.

“Well met!” I exclaimed as the dog wheeled quickly and evaded the attack. “You showed yourself boss of the mountain lion the other day; let’s see if you’ll prove boss of the big-horns to-day.” Unwittingly I had given him the name I was to know him by afterwards, “Boss of the Bighorns,” or just plain “Boss.”

The battle was on, and it was the prettiest, cleanest fight I ever expect to see. The big-horn was clearly bent on the destruction of his foe, while the dog was just as evidently using only defensive tactics. That attitude could not last long, for the buck was a hard, aggressive

scrapper, and his needle-point horns met the hide a good many times.

Thereupon the dog became a regular fury; snapping, snarling, darting, a whirlwind of teeth and claws that drew blood at every nip and thrust. The big buck was game and took the gaff, fighting all the way. It must have been half an hour that the battle waged, the other bighorns passive spectators, huddled together just out of range of the two clashing foes.

It was a contest to test the mettle of any wild thing, be he dog or bighorn sheep, and there was no let-up until the buck, covered with blood from a hundred gashes, went down in utter exhaustion. Through it all the dog, save for that low snarl of his, had uttered no cry of pain or defiance. He simply had a big job to do and he put his heart into the doing.

The task ended, he stood for a moment panting in great convulsive gasps. Then, wonder of wonders, he stalked over to where the buck lay as if dead, and after sniffing him over, fell to licking the fast clotting blood from the many terrible wounds. Here was an act of kindness

and staunch fidelity past human understanding.

Suddenly the truth came to me. The splendid fellow was herding those sheep. Preposterous? Well, perhaps. Yet the proof was there before my eyes. I knew it even before the big buck staggered weakly to his feet; knew it before the flock, led by the buck and driven by the dog—who was noisy enough now—turned and paced slowly up the opposite slope, disappearing from sight.

The Boss of the Bighorns indeed! He had licked their leader in fair fight.

“What’s it all about?” I asked myself, but there was no answer.

A strange thing this. A glorious shepherd, masterless, yet hardly a wild dog, was driving a herd of untamable mountain sheep up a hill-side while I stood gaping after them.

“Never mind,” I promised myself, “when I’ve finished my own little pet job and won my own fight, I’ll come back, Boss, and we’ll see who’s the ‘boss,’ you or I.”

These were large words, but destined, in a measure at least, to come true.

In the meanwhile there was a big job immediately before me. I had a trail to locate, and the whole Rocky Mountain system in which to find it.

Still, I had hopes that before many hours I would be gazing down upon the trail that Rawlins would follow. Just now my best plan was to follow the lead of Boss and his flock up the next hill. From there I could map out my next move.

I flatter myself that I am a fair climber, but it was an hour before I stood on the peak. At no time had I caught sight of my trail-makers, but now as I made a half circle of the long slope before me, I saw them almost at the bottom, tiny specks of moving white, a good two miles away.

“In a hurry to leave this neck of the woods, or maybe he’s going somewhere. I wonder if he is — going *somewhere*. I wonder.”

I turned my eyes toward the east, where I confidently expected to catch sight of my other quarry, but neither horse nor rider was in sight. In all that expanse there was no moving thing

in sight save that single file of bighorn sheep, snowy-white in the distance, and close behind them the brown speck I knew to be "Boss."

"Nothing to do but wait here an hour or so, and then if nothing shows up I'll have to cut across lots and see if I can spot the trail. Rawlins won't leave much of a trace in this kind of country, even if he doesn't suspect that I'm following. I guess I've elected myself to *some* job."

After a half hour of silent watching I began talking aloud in order to break the monotony of the vast, oppressive silence. "Got to remind myself that I'm out here in the wild without a gun, and that foxy old Rawlins saw to it that I didn't have more than enough grub to take me back to camp—if I hustled. I can go on light rations and make it stretch an extra day, but that's my limit. I have a hank of fishline in my pack, and I know there's one hook there. Maybe I could jerk a trout out of one of these brooks, though I can't depend on that. A half hour more up here and then I'm going to hit the hillside.

"There's my one signboard, that big lump of dirt across yonder, and beyond that is my other landmark. If Rawlins passes between them — and he's pretty near bound to — I ought to be able to pick up his tracks. If he's already passed, he'd be in that stretch of scrub pine on that long slope by now. If so, he traveled by night to make it. If he started at daylight he'd still be out of sight to the south. So that's that until the clock strikes six."

Rawlins was not in sight at the end of a full hour. I was somewhat disappointed as I began the long descent of the hill. I found an easy, well-marked path, over which a countless number of sheep and deer had trod in the ages past. It led in the general direction I was going and I was well satisfied to follow it. One thing perplexed me as I climbed down and toward the northeast. As my angle of sight changed I saw that my two mountain peaks did not lie as close together as I had figured, and as I went farther I saw that there was no mere valley separating them, but that other hills lay between them.

Since I had been wrong as to that, maybe I was mistaken all along the line. Maybe Rawlins was not coming this way at all. Perhaps he would swing east of the closer mountain. If I cut straight across, our paths would intersect all of twenty miles away.

“Maybe I’d better hike back to where he turned me loose and pick up his trail there. But shucks, think of all the time I’d lose. No, I’m going to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer, or at least until my grub’s gone. I’ll cross his line of march before dark, and I’ll keep my eyes peeled every step.”

Resolutely I set myself to the task of covering as much space as possible, using all caution once I was on the level that I should not miss the least sign of Rawlins’ passing. Every mile or so, when the country would permit, I climbed a tree or a rise to scan the landscape, but no moving dark speck rewarded my efforts.

My appetite gave me a dozen false alarms long before noon came. At last I sat down beside a cool mountain spring and drank my fill. I cut off a small piece of lean bacon and

chewed it, trying vainly to persuade myself that I had dined well. Fortunately, a half hour after I had resumed my journey I ran into a clump of blackberries that were juicy ripe.

The farther I traveled the slower I went, feeling sure that Rawlins must have passed this way not long before. Twice I shouted with joy, only to change my tune the next instant. At one place a bear had scratched a mark in the hard earth, digging for a root; and the second time some smaller animal was responsible for my short-lived hope. When I did find a real sign it was all unexpected; in fact, I nearly passed it before I realized that I had come near missing the one best bet.

It was only a broken bit of branch, a few paces off my course. A bear might have torn it off, or it might have been broken by the wind. I changed my opinion quickly as I carefully felt over the ground below where the branch had hung. Eyesight was no good here; it takes fingertips to locate a trail in ground so well covered.

Yes, there it was, the print of a hoof. Who,

save Rawlins, would be riding in this wild country? I felt its outline carefully. "Going west by north," I murmured. "I sure was some little old guesser. Now for some real trailing."

It took real trailing. In spite of all my care, and my certainty that northwest was his general direction, I was sadly puzzled a good many times as the afternoon wore along.

"All right, blackberries," I remarked as I came upon a thick patch loaded with big ripe fruit, "we'll just call this the finish—for you, especially. It's been a long time between bites, as the rattlesnake said to his mate."

After eating my fill of the ripe berries and resting for a half hour, I felt so refreshed that I decided to go forward a bit. I had been following a much fresher trail the latter part of the afternoon, and I had some slight hopes that the gleam of a campfire would reward my efforts before long, for night was settling over the mountains.

The next hill, a scant half mile away, brought my reward, and from its summit I caught the

first glimpse of my former host. While I could not see him clearly I did see how every now and then the light of the fire would be hidden from me as he passed before it.

"All right, Buckskin," I chuckled, "you've showed yourself such a good trailer, now let's see what kind of a scout you are and how close to Rawlins you can get without being discovered. If he didn't pack a gun," I added grimly, "I'd get a lot closer than Mr. Thatch would care for."

Thereupon I began a very careful descent of the steep slope, fearful lest even at this distance some misstep betray my presence. As I drew nearer I doubled my caution; the last quarter mile was made at a snail's pace. Fortunately there were many low clumps of bush, and even had the night been less dark I could have come close without much danger.

Doubly aided by the bushes and the night, I crept steadily nearer until a scant twenty feet separated us. I had been compelled to circle the camp in order to avoid Rawlins' horse, knowing that he had keener ears than his mas-

ter. However, the horse was much occupied with his grazing and took no alarm at my presence, even if he noticed it.

There sat Rawlins, also much engrossed in grazing, though his took the form of coffee, pan bread, bacon and a brownish substance that looked very much like fried young squirrel. It was all I could do to keep from jumping on his neck and snatching the delicious looking morsel from his hand.

However, I decided to bide my time, being greatly pleased with two discoveries made by my first hasty survey of the camp. Rawlins had pitched camp under a big pine, and leaning against the tree were two rifles — mine the nearer to me. Rawlins had his back to the tree and had taken off his belt and thrown it on the ground close beside the two rifles. In the belt holster hung both his six-guns. He was unarmed.

It was the work of an instant to slip back into the bush, worm my way around directly behind the tree, crawl over and stand up, hidden by its trunk. From here I could not see

Rawlins, but I was quite sure he had not seen me. Pausing a little for breath, I reached cautiously around the tree till my outstretched fingers caught the touch of cold steel. My rifle! I drew it to me.

I had been nervous until that moment, but the feel of my beloved weapon seemed to steady me. As coolly as if my foe had been ten miles away instead of that many feet, I threw the lever halfway down and felt to see that a cartridge was in place. Then I stepped around the tree into the firelight.

“ Well, Mr. Thatch Raw-Lewis, I’ll trouble you for a helping of that squirrel.”

## CHAPTER VI

### THE FIRST MAN FIGHT

“Help yourself, son,” replied Rawlins easily, “as long as you’ve come all this way to get it. But why all the gun play?”

“Didn’t you get the squirrel with a gun?”

“Shore, kid, I done that, but I didn’t shout afore I shot.”

“You won’t *after* I shoot, either, if you don’t take your hand away from that skillet. I don’t aim to have my clothes spoiled with hot grease in case you should miss my eyes.”

“You’re a cool un,” he said admiringly, drawing back his hand.

“Gun always keeps me cool.”

“Huh,” a grunt, “you won’t be so cool next time we meet. I’ll give you a spankin’ with my bare hands.”

“There’ll be more smart in your hands than there is in you head then.”

“ Yah—if you had muscles to match your tongue, young feller, you’d be the world’s strongest. Mind if I help myself to another piece of my squirrel—out of the skillet? ”

“ Not at all. You might pass it—skillet and all.”

“ Thanks.” Then with a sudden change of manner as he took hold of the handle of the hot frying pan: “ Now young feller, I’m going to let you in on a secret. But while I’m a-tellin’ it don’t get excited and do nothin’ rash. Nothin’ like tryin’ to git over to that tree an’ pick up a real gun else I *might* take a notion to fol-ler yore clever suggestion an’ let you have that piece o’ squirrel in its own grease, which might put yore purty lamps out. The fact is, that gun o’ yourn ain’t no more use than a pair o’ hind legs to a chicken. It jest won’t shoot.

“ Yep,” as I started in dismay, “ it won’t. It’s got ammunition, all right, but you see I took the firin’ pin out. I was lookin’ at the gun—purty plaything—while I rested my horse ag’in noon, an’ I took out the firin’ pin an’ plain lost it; it’s so danged little, ye know. You

might pull the trigger once an' save callin' me a liar."

I did pull the trigger. A sharp click was all. We stood there a matter of a full minute, facing each other, he with his skillet, I with my useless rifle.

"Might as well drop your squirrel pan," I remarked finally, "your grease is cold."

"Still warm enough to lard any bullets yore gun'll fire. Maybe I won't save that spankin' till next time, after all," drawled Rawlins. "Grease or no grease, I'll bash yer head ef you make a move toward them guns."

"While you're doing all that bashing, kindly keep one good eye on the butt end of this gun. If your skull's as thin as your bluff you'll have a stove in your dome that'll keep you warm o' nights."

That was the end of the parleying, for the next instant, with a roar like that of an angered bull, Rawlins slammed the skillet at my head. I dodged it by an inch and the next moment he charged full at me, ducking under my brandished rifle. Before I could fully realize what

had happened he had both arms clamped around my chest and was crushing the breath out of me.

Strangely enough, after that first instant of panicky fear my feeling was one of relief. Strong as his grip was, it was not overpowering. I found I could struggle against it. But for a little while at least my movements were slow, my resistance weak. My mind was not on the fight — not this fight. Sharply, as at the movies, a picture had flashed into my mind: Boss, facing and vanquishing the bighorn buck. "You showed your mettle there, dog, just as I am being called on now. It was the test of your dogship. This is the test of my manhood. I've got the size of a man, the muscles of a man. All right, boy, let's see if you've got the heart of a man."

It was indeed my first man fight. As a youngster I had had a few scraps, but there it was a case of fighting for the pure love of battle; after it was over we shook hands and were better friends than ever. There would be no handshaking after this set-to.

How long did I spend thinking of these things? A minute? A second? I don't know. Only until Rawlins, feeling secure in my lack of fight, had released one hand and was working it toward my throat. Then I struck, a short-arm jab that traveled a scant two inches but caught him full on the jaw and rocked his head. With his free hand, the other still clutching me madly, he pummeled me in the back over the kidneys.

I gave a twist that wrenched every muscle in me and tore loose from his grasp, only to take a blow over the heart as I staggered back. I tried to counter, but fell short, giving him a chance to bore in and smash me twice in the face before I could cover up.

I had boxed a great deal and loved the game. Back home there were few boys of my age or size who would offer me any advantage. But this was different. Rawlins was no beginner himself, and worst of all, he had learned his fisticuffs in a school that asked no quarter and overlooked no advantages. Any blow was fair, so long as it landed; any trick was commendable. Tripping, kicking, gouging, holding, all

were legitimate. It was a wrestling match, rough-and-tumble and prize fight rolled in one.

I had hiked all day, while Rawlins had ridden; Rawlins had feasted, while I had famished. On my side was youth and a clean life. "I can stand the gaff longer than he," I encouraged myself, "just so he doesn't break through and knock me cold."

It was apparent that he was bent on doing that very thing without any loss of time. He was fast, quick on his feet, and there was power behind his punches. Every one that came home left a sickening ache and more often than not brought the blood.

Close guarding of my body left me open to a jab that cut a gash over my left eye and threatened to blind me with the blood that gushed out. He followed up the advantage with clean short jabs to my midsection that almost knocked the wind out of me.

Oh, I fought back! Despite the dizziness and the pain, each exchange of blows found me cooler even if weaker, more confident of winning the fight. Behind me were the guns, and past my

flying fists he could not press. Out-punch me he might, but out-maneuver me he should not. It was to be a fight of flesh against flesh, and let the best man win!

There were no rounds, no referee, no spectators, no applause. No one groaned when a terrific right to the jaw sent me reeling, nor cheered when Rawlins, crowding me close after that wicked blow, ran full tilt into a solar plexus shift that made him grunt and drop his guard. My right to the jaw then was meant to knock him out, but in the flickering light of the camp fire my judgment of distance was poor, and my knuckles suffered as much as did his chin.

To this day I marvel at that fight; marvel that I lasted through it. There was the time when, missing a left swing, I tripped over a root and went sprawling into both his fists. One arm swung about my neck, the other fist beat back and forth like a triphammer, sounding a devil's tatto on my short ribs. I clinched with him, and balancing uncertainly, we struggled for a fall. When it came I was beneath, but I rolled clear and struggled to my feet.

Once more we went at it. All thought of the guns was forgotten now. Rawlins' only aim was to annihilate this mere boy who had dared to defy him. Back and forth we battled; through the fire, over it, swinging vicious rights and lefts above its singeing flames. It was not a pretty fight to see.

Just when I thought Rawlins was beginning to weaken he redoubled his efforts, but the very violence of his attack gave me heart. Something told me that it was the last flare of his strength; that he was making a despairing effort to beat down, in one supreme assault, the advantage that youth was giving me.

The ebb of that effort sent a glow through me that did much to revive my flagging strength, a glow of amazement that I had been able to stand so much punishment.

I did not know how far to trust the apparent weakness of Rawlins' blows. Big Jim had once said: "The hardest time to knock out a game man is when he's almost licked." Coupled with that was his comment on a street brawl we had once witnessed: "When a yellow dog knows he's

beaten, then's the time to look out. He'll play his last dirty trick just before he's ready to run for it."

Rawlins knew he was licked. He knew that in a fair, man-to-man, stand-up-and-take-it fight, I was his master. I had met his blows with blows, his holds with breaks, his cunning with equal cunning. It was my first man fight.

Conscious of impending defeat, he was a more dangerous adversary than Rawlins the victorious bully. Easily victorious, he would have been satisfied to bestow a few parting kicks on me, throwing my useless gun at me as I scurried out of camp. Now, nothing but my life would satisfy him. I knew that. The guns? A knife? I tried to read his thoughts as I parried his futile blows, feeling desperately for an opening that would let my right through and end the fight.

A knife — the guns — which?

A sudden lightning dart of his right hand groundward was my first warning of his intention. His hunting knife, used in dressing the squirrel, had lain glinting in the firelight. Now

it gleamed menacingly in Rawlins' hand, cutting a vicious circle in the air as he lunged toward me.

"You—you rat!" he screamed as the blade flashed toward my heart.

It was a close instant. There was just one chance to take and I took it. Out went my arm to catch the blow. At the same time I struck hard with my right. The two blows landed together. I felt a sharp jab of pain as the keen blade bit through the flesh; a numbing surge of agony swept through my right arm as my fist, with all the strength of my body behind it, caught Rawlins flush on the chin.

I heard a snap as his teeth came together. For a moment he stood there, arms hanging limp, and his eyes seemed to fix on some distant point. Slowly his knees sagged, then his head jerked forward on his chest, and doubling up like a jack-knife he plunged forward on his face. A convulsive twitch, then he lay very still. He was knocked out—cold!

I thought my first duty was to myself, and after making sure that his heart was still beating

I turned my efforts to dressing and binding my wounds. Good water was near-by, and sticking Rawlins' revolvers in my pocket and throwing his rifle far into the brush as a precaution against a possible revival before my return, I went to its cool relief. A handerchief torn into strips served as bandages, but most of my bruises and cuts had to be satisfied with water dressing.

The knife gash was the only serious wound. The blade had bit deep, all but coming out on the other side, right through the fleshy part of my forearm an inch or so below the elbow. I had difficulty stopping the flow of blood but the cold water finally did the trick. In the meantime the slight faintness that had come over me as I cleaned out the cut was fast disappearing. A long, reviving drink of the cold water drove the last fog from my brain.

“ Better go back and take a look at my victim, I guess. Might take him a drink, too. Expect he needs it.”

He surely did. I hope that I shall never again see such a battered, swollen face. He appeared to be unconscious, though beginning to

writhe and twist. I had brought water from the spring in the camp coffee pail, and this I threw on his head, retreating hastily for another pailful when his choking and sputtering warned me that he was regaining consciousness.

When I returned he was sitting up. His groans would have sounded pitiful to any ears save mine, but they were music to my soul—much as I hate to confess it. “Want a drink of water?” I asked, when his groans had somewhat subsided.

His reply almost stunned me. “Dash it, no! Water! Ask a Westerner if he wants a drink of water to bring him to! Bad as the Kentucky colonel who had been hurt in a runaway. Asked him that same question. ‘Gad, sir,’ he cried, ‘I must be dyin’ sure or nobody’d ever dare ask me if I wanted *water!*’”

This reply told me several things: First, that Rawlins wasn’t all bad—that he was game to the core, for all his yellow; and that he had been conscious a long while before I returned!

“Get up,” I commanded shortly. “You can’t play off on me. I’ve got your guns, so

you don't need to be casting your eyes around for them. I threw your rifle somewhere in the brush. You can find it in the morning. I'm going to take one of your six-guns with me and a few shells from your belt. You will find it in Mineral City the next time you go there. I'll leave it with Shorty Winters. You may have heard of him," I added with biting sarcasm, repeating his parting remarks to me just twenty-four hours before.

"What you going to do with the other gun?" he asked sullenly.

"Take out the cylinder pin and keep it as a souvenir in exchange for my firing pin."

"Take my advice, buddy, and go slow on that stuff. Do you know what I was doing while you was givin' yore bloody noggin a bath down there at the spring?"

"Having bad dreams, from the face you were making when I came back."

"Them six-guns is empty. Yep, take a look at 'em. I was cleanin' 'em while the squirrel was browning just afore you come. An' that ain't all; the belt's empty, too. I've got all them

purty little ca'ttridges in my pocket — see? ”

“ I do. I'll have to lick you again, I guess, to make you give them up.”

“ Shore will,” cheerfully. “ In the meantime you kin oblige me an' my pardner by stickin' yore paws into the blue. Show him yore credentials, Shorty.”

I wheeled. The “ credentials ” — a pair of forty-fours — were there, backed up by a wizened creature who well deserved the name of “ Shorty,” but whose hands were as steady as the mountains themselves.

“ Oh, yes, he's there, and that's really him,” snorted Rawlins. “ Mister Vance, meet my friend and pardner, Shorty Winters. And you might just hand him over that gun o' mine, as per yore agreement. Shorty, take the gun, an' hand him his rifle. I tol' him you would,” with a derisive chuckle.

I took the useless rifle, was relieved of the six-gun, and then asked casually: “ Want the other popgun? I had both of them.”

“ Turn around,” ordered Shorty.

I did. I did more than that. As I turned I

swung my rifle out of the crook of my arm, caught the end of the barrel and let it crash with full force against Shorty's chin.

"Look out!" yelled Rawlins, quick-witted enough to anticipate the maneuver but too slow with the warning.

"Lights out!" I shouted, ducking low and running with all speed into the darkness.

## CHAPTER VII

### BOSS LEADS THE WAY

It was a wonder I did not go crashing into a tree as I careened wildly through the night, trying to put as much distance as possible between me and ruffians. I could hear them close behind, blundering through the brush. Finally the sounds of pursuit died out and I slowed down, confident that my movements could not be heard.

One thought cheered me as I finally came to a full stop some two miles from the scene of conflict — cheered me in spite of the fact that I had lost all my equipment, blankets and food, saving only my useless rifle. The coming of Shorty Winters told me two things. First, we were near the mine. Otherwise, in this land of big distances, Shorty would never have been able to step into the scene at such an opportune time.

The other thing was not a fact but a theory. Shorty had come from Mineral City, while Rawlins had come from Tartel. We were much closer to Mineral City, perhaps no more than a day's journey on horseback. Either the two had met by appointment, or by chance. Knowing Rawlins pretty well by now, I figured that he was not a man who left things to chance. Shorty must have known that Rawlins was on the way to the mine or he wouldn't have come here to seek him. Why should he seek him? Ah, there was where my theory came in.

Big Jim had talked with Shorty. In asking him questions he had betrayed more of his secret, perhaps, than he had intended. Shorty, loyal to the man who had befriended him, had come to warn Rawlins that another was hot on the trail of the mine.

It all sounded plausible enough, but it left me up in the air as to my future plans. What could a boy with a useless rifle do against two armed men? Not much, I had to admit. I could not get along without food, and aside from fishing I had no way of getting any.

Suppose we were close to the mine; suppose I followed the two and located it, what then? I shrugged my shoulders. Away down deep I knew that I would do that very thing. After that I would trust to luck. First off, however, I would steal a wink of sleep. I knew that Rawlins and Shorty would not wait until dawn to break camp. Daylight would find them well on the way to the mine, if not at it. Oh, well, a little sleep wouldn't do any harm, and finding the softest spot I could, I curled around my lank stomach for a much needed rest.

It was broad daylight when I awoke. I tried to jump up in my usual manner, but my muscles were too sore for that. My arm felt like a board, knots and all, and there was an ache above my left eye that made me wince. I was conscious, too, of a gnawing in the region of my stomach.

“O, for a dozen flapjacks and a pint of black coffee!” I sighed. “I could eat a leather strap and pick my teeth on the buckle.”

After a little massage and careful exercise I warmed the soreness out of my muscles enough so that I could get up and walk about. In the

meantime I took stock of my few possessions. I still had my pocketknife, a few matches, my watch, a length of stout cord, and my useless rifle. All I lacked was a firing pin. I still had plenty of cartridges, loose ones I had stowed in my shirt pocket and which Rawlins had overlooked when he had relieved me of the others. Then, too, the magazine of the rifle still held a few. How useless they seemed!

Thereupon a real idea came to me. Once, years back, I had been given an old .22 rifle. It was minus a shell extractor and the spring was weak. The firing pin was worn off so that it wouldn't dent the end of the shell. With a shingle nail and a file I had fashioned a firing pin.

One blade of my knife was a file, but how about a shingle nail? My shoes had rubber heels that had been put on with short, heavy nails. If I could get one out, there was my firing pin.

It was no easy task. Try it some time without any tool save a pocket knife.

I don't suppose I could have managed it if I

hadn't found a nail that had not been driven all the way in and so was not clinched. Even then I put several unwelcome knicks in the big blade of my knife before the nail finally yielded and slowly came out. It took half an hour of patient filing before it would fit my rifle, and the small blade of my knife lost its life acting as a screw driver. Even so, I figured the sacrifice was well worth while.

"All right — squirrels, pack rats, bears, camaunts and hoptoads, look out, I'm coming!" I exclaimed as I started for the nearest clump of trees. "One of you is going to have breakfast with me if you don't look sharp."

A squirrel was the unlucky one, and the first shot brought him tumbling from the top of a blasted pine. It did not take long to have him roasting over a hot fire, and even less time for me to dispose of all but the bones, for, though saltless, it was done to a delicious brown.

"There!" I sighed comfortably, "aside from a few thumps, bumps, bruises and cuts, I'm better off than ever. Now to follow after my two friends and try to locate their mine."

It was quite evident that I had been right in my guess that they would take to the trail at once, for the fire was burnt out except for a few charred ends that had been scattered by our fight, and my blanket and pack lay in the bushes where I had dropped them, in plain sight if the two had waited for daylight. They had left plenty of telltale tracks, as if they had no fear of pursuit. And, after all, why should they? Perhaps they had never heard of a shoe nail firing pin.

I started on their trail at once, feeling that I had no time to lose. That feeling gradually gave place to one of perplexity, for the trail, while easy to follow, kept changing direction. "As if they kept changing their minds," I remarked, wondering if this was the real reason. Their course was still generally northwest, although once they went due west for nearly three miles, and then the trail swung around the spur of a lonely peak and lead back south.

The worst was yet to come, for suddenly all trace of their passing ceased. "Surely they couldn't have back-trailed. Wouldn't do that un-

less they were trying to throw me off the scent, and I doubt if they give a whoop whether I follow or not. Guess I'll have to circle."

The quarter mile that I cut around brought results, but hardly what I expected. I struck an old and much used trail, a path such as I had found back in the bighorn country.

"The question now is," I debated, "whether my two friends came along this game path or where they did go. It's beaten as hard as marble and their horses weren't very sharp shod. Looking for a hoof mark is like standing with your mouth open under a cherry tree and waiting for a cherry to get ripe and drop in. However, maybe I had better hike along a bit and see what I can see."

In the course of half a mile I saw marks in the trail that might have been made by a horse-shoe. Again, they might have been cut by the sharp hoofs of sheep. I followed on, my course bearing a shade north of west. It was well that I decided to follow the trail.

After an hour or so I came to a positive bit of evidence. The path led through timber, and

midway of the clump was the remains of a fire. Judging from the feathers, Rawlins and Shorty had dined well on mountain partridge—breakfast, no doubt. According to that, I could not be more than six or seven hours behind, for my watch showed the time to be a little short of noon.

However, my stomach did not quarrel over the few minutes that were lacking. It was busy grumbling about another matter of more consequence to it. “Never mind, tummy, maybe we’ll run across the mate to that partridge before long. Just now we’ll have to push ahead and see if we can cut down their lead, and trust to luck for dinner.”

As luck would have it there was no dinner, and supper proved to be almost as slim, though luck of another sort was certainly with me. As I look back upon the whole affair I must confess that luck had a great deal to do with it all the way through. I did some tall guessing from time to time, and it was only the greatest good fortune that when it counted most I guessed right. Witness my next guess.

Along about three o'clock, just as I had topped a peak I had been eyeing for miles and hoping I would not be called upon to climb, I saw something that made me whistle in surprise. No, it wasn't the fact that near the crest of the opposite slope I could see two horses, and ahead of them two plodding men. That was a joyous sight, but hardly surprising since I had been looking for it this long while.

I saw Boss!

He was alone, coming across the valley below me at a swinging trot, his head low and his tail high, as if he were following a familiar trail. That was the first thing that struck me. When he came to the game path, visible to me even at this distance, he paused an instant, sniffing, going back and forth a dozen steps or so. Then, as if deciding that the scent he had noticed was none of his business, he left the path at right angles and followed up the valley.

Right then I made the wildest guess of my whole career. All along I had been trying to fit Boss into the scheme of things; to figure out what he was doing and how he came to be here

in the mountains. A dog and a man go together. There had been only one man I knew of in these parts. Big Jim's brother. That is, if the story Shorty had told were true and the man really was Tom Raily. Could it be that Boss was Tom Raily's dog, left here masterless when Tom, sick and delirious, had made his way to Mineral City?

As I stood there watching the dog, his steady gait and unwillingness to change his direction and follow a new scent, however warm it might be, served to convince me that he was going to some definite place. About the only time a dog will refuse to hunt is when he is headed for home.

That was it, I decided. Boss was going home.

If the rest of my wild guess was correct, then home was the miner's cabin, and the cabin would not be far from the mine that the three of us were seeking—Rawlins, Shorty and I. Of one thing I was now certain; the two men did not know the exact location of the mine. In all that vast country there was but one living creature who could go unerringly to the spot—Boss!

Which should I follow? I puzzled over this question for a full minute. I could still see both of my guides, the dog and the men. Should I follow the dog, who knew; or the men, who did not? "Columbus took a chance," I argued, "guess I will too. I can find this hump again and I can find their trail anywhere they've passed. If I'm fooled in Boss, all I've lost is time, and I've a lot of that. If Boss leads me true—boy! I'm there! There, and with a firing pin in my rifle. Lead on, Boss, I'm hot on your trail."

This was a large boast, for the dog was setting a killing pace and already had a big lead. However, in this up and down country, almost bare of trees and underbrush, it would be no great trick to keep in sight for every little ridge gave a fellow a five mile view ahead. Then, too, I had a hunch that the trail would not be long.

We started out due north, almost at right angles to the course I had been following. As Boss disappeared over the summit of a long, gradual slope, he had gained a still greater lead, and I was barely started up the slope. I made

the top of the ridge in good time and plunged down the grade just as Boss was topping the next ridge. Between us was a deep ravine, with the other side promising some mighty rough going.

It took just an hour to manage it, and at that I felt that I had reason to be proud of the speed of my progress. I was rather anxious as I neared the top. Boss had made much better time than I. If the next dip from sight was very close he would be far out of my range of vision.

I had good cause for worry. The crest I had been expecting was not on my ridge but on the next, fifteen minutes farther on. When I had topped this I found I was in a new kind of country. The mountains seemed to end here, sweeping down toward wooded lowlands in a long, easy descent. Before me lay such a vast sweep of country that I was fairly staggered by its magnitude, accustomed though I was to great distances. Away in the distance I fancied I saw the clustered houses of a town, and nearer at hand I was sure of a group of ranch buildings.

These details I saw at the first glance, but a

closer survey failed to reveal my speeding guide. Boss was nowhere in sight. I carefully scanned each ravine leading down to the blue line that marked the place where night had already claimed the earth, but no moving speck was to be seen.

"Now what?" I asked myself. "Night is coming on pretty fast and I wouldn't be able to get half way back to my old trail before dark. Here there is no trail at all. Looks like the earth had swallowed the dog. He sure isn't in sight. He's had time to get a long way ahead of me, but I can see for a long way, and no dog. Time to exercise my guesser again. That mine isn't many miles from here, I'll gamble on that."

I wasted no time in further speculation, but decided to follow along the crest, keeping an eye on both sides of the ridge, for I had no way of knowing whether the dog had passed through this last ravine. I turned to the right, moving slightly up hill, arguing that if the dog's destination were lower down he would have crossed farther to the east where the ridges were lower.

Half an hour later, when I was just about to give up the job, a faint yelp at my left drew my attention. It was too far away for me to determine whether it was dog, coyote or timber wolf, but I was ready to believe that it came from the throat of Boss. At any rate I hastened my steps in that direction.

A half mile had been covered before I again heard the sound. This time it was very distinct, so close that I almost expected to see its maker right at my side.

I turned, but no dog met my gaze. This puzzled me, for the sound had been so close and my view was unobstructed for a quarter mile in that direction. Nevertheless I turned toward the sound, trusting my ears rather than my eyes. It was well that I did. Within less than two hundred yards the ground dropped away sharply into a shallow gully that zigzagged off to the west.

And there was the dog! Surprised as I had been at my first sight of him there where he and the big buck had fought the mountain lion, I was more surprised now.

Down at the bottom of the ravine was a tiny cabin of logs and sod, a door and a window on the side facing my position. My first glance showed Boss standing before the door, scratching and whining. Now he darted to the window, jumping up as if to hurl himself through it, but each time falling just short of the mark. Then back to the door he would go, clawing at it in a frenzied effort to tear it down.

"Poor fellow," I said aloud. "He thinks his master is still inside."

I started to climb down the steep cliff, and in my haste I overlooked an easy path less than fifty feet away. However, I managed to slip, slide, stumble and fall the fifty feet or so, landing with a thump less than a dozen yards from the cabin.

Up to this time the dog had paid no attention to me. Now he dashed toward me, snarling and showing his teeth, but halting when I lifted my gun to a position where it would be handy. Slowly he backed away from me as I moved toward the cabin door, darting aside as his back struck the corner of the cabin.

For some reason that I could not understand I dreaded to open that door. The latchstring was out, in true Western style, and there was nothing sinister looking about this tiny little box-like house. Still I hesitated. Perhaps it was the dog and his unfriendly attitude that made me nervous.

At any rate I called, "Hello, there!" surprised at the shakiness of my voice, and startled by the echo that the hills flung back.

There was no answer. I reached out and pulled the latchstring. With a whining creak the door came open. I heard a noise and stepped aside just in time to avoid being bowled over by the dog. He had dashed through the door and turning just inside the threshold, stood facing me with bared fangs. With a deep-throated growl he invited me to come in if I dared.

For a moment I stood there, peering into the gloom of the cabin, trying to make out the form of the objects seen in the half-light. A creepy, uncanny feeling stole over me and again I sang out a halting, "Hello, there!" and again only

the hills flung back an answer. Silence then, save for the deep growling of the dog, challenging my advance.

I had no desire to come in. Gradually my eyes grew accustomed to the dark interior and beyond Boss, half seen in the last dim light of the dying day, a man was seated at a rough table made of a log split in half. Another log was his chair, the back made of two small limbs and a crosspiece. He was leaning forward, his head on the table, like one who has fallen asleep.

I knew instinctively that he was not asleep. There was something so pathetic about the way his head lay on the table.

The man was dead!

## CHAPTER VIII

### A DEAD MAN'S TALE

I do not know why the sight of that dead man should have given me such a tremendous shock. I had seen dead men before. Perhaps it was the deep shadows of the coming night, the deeper shadows of the canyon, the utter loneliness of the place. The uncanny challenge of the dog might have had something to do with it. I do not know. I do know that I dreaded to enter that doorway, and it was not through fear of the chattering jaws of the dog.

I called to the huddled figure, expecting no reply and receiving none. I spoke to the dog, coaxingly at first, but his only answer was to increase his growls. Then I tried commanding him, but his response to that was to crowd closer to the doorway and stand, teeth bared, ready to leap at me.

I looked about for a stout club, but saw none. "I'd hate to hurt you, Boss, but if that's a can of beans I see there on that shelf, I'd pretty near shoot you for it. Which end of a gun frightens you most, butt or muzzle—ah, I thought so. You're gun-shy, eh? All right, just mosey out of my way. That's the boy, back out. You can growl all you want once I get that door shut in your face."

At the first sight of the leveled rifle the dog had begun to back away. He did not cringe nor did he abate his threatening attitude, but he did give ground. I knew that if the rifle barrel wavered the least bit he would leap at me and do his best to tear me to pieces. I did not relax the slightest until I had him bluffed outside the door.

Then I slammed the heavy door and dropped the stout bar in place. "At last we are alone!" I exclaimed, then checked my levity at the thought of my inanimate companion. I had to come close to him in getting to the battered tin lamp that stood on the table, and my heart almost stood still as I reached over his shoulder.

One glance at his face when the light flared up was enough to tell me that not only was he dead but he had been dead for several days, three or four at least, perhaps a week. The cause of his death was not so easy to determine, although there was a bandage about his left arm, from which the sleeve had been ripped to the shoulder. Other details I did not stop to note just then, for in the man's hand was a pencil, one of these silver, automatic affairs, and beneath its point lay a sheet of paper. Without removing it I read:

“ Dear Brother:

“ I have tried and tried to get word to you, so that I can pass on to you the good fortune that I am afraid has come too late for me. It's a gold mine, buddie, a bonanza; the kind you and I used to dream about in the good old days. I've staked her out and filed my claim, so there's no chance of being beaten out of it as I was the last mine I located.

“ I have had some trouble with my partner, a no-account ticket-of-leave man from old England, but unless he double-crosses me worse than

I give him credit for having brains to do, all's well. We had a slight disagreement about his share in the claim, but we've finally agreed to dissolve partnership and he will stake the next claim below discovery.

“But I'm afraid I'm done for. I had a bad fall at the shaft two weeks ago — broke my arm and smashed my ribs pretty bad. Thought we had the damage all repaired, but a ledge caved in on me two days ago and now I'm laid up for fair. A nasty cough has set in and I seem to be bleeding internally. Partner's gone to town to get me a doctor — hope I last till he gets back. I'll finish this letter when the table stands still and the room quits turning round on me.”

Evidently there was a lapse here of several days, and when the letter was continued, on another sheet, the writer's condition had changed greatly for the worse. The handwriting was scrawling, the letters illformed, and the sentences did not always make sense.

“Partner came back — no doctor. Horse threw him or something. Threw him, I guess. Says

so anyway. Bad fall he had. Think he's out of his head; at least he's hazy. Both hazy. Things don't seem very real. Got a notion he'd like to see me kick off—help me, maybe. Says he was in Mineral City but I know he wasn't. No doctor would refuse. He goes back to-day or there'll be murder done.

“ ‘Pard, you got to bring me a doctor—I’m off my top.

“ He’s gone. That last shot was uncomfortably close. Going out soon to see what he took. Needn’t come back; I don’t seem to care. Everything is easy if you just don’t care. Remember first time I told you that? Cough’s bad, though, and queer lights dance front of my eyes. Wonder if it’s night yet. Been dark now for two days.

“ I’m sorry we had that fight. He was a good partner and square. Maybe the horse did throw him. Wonder if he took my horse. And Nip—haven’t seen Nip for two days. Remember now I sent him with a letter. Same as St. Bernards. Remember the story in the old reader? No snow here though. Guess I didn’t

send him — just out hunting for food I guess.

“ Good dog, Nip, just like his mother. Finest sheep dog in world. Carry letter like St. Bernard. Wish I had letter.

“ Must be morning; it feels warmer. Help to-day or no use. No use, I guess. Just heard something; sounds like a shot. Dreaming, I guess — shooting was yesterday — day before, maybe. Wonder if I hit him. Guess he got me, or is it the cough? Must have hit me, though.

“ Oh, well, what's the diff? All got to go some time. My time, reckon. That's good Yankee. Funny notion for dying man. Guess I am.”

After that the writing became a scrawl, the words running into each other and the lines no more than wavering curves across the page. But at the very end was one sentence, startling not only because it was just as carefully framed as if it had been a line in a copy book, but standing out like a shouted accusation:

“ He murdered me, just the same as if he had stuck a knife through my heart.”

That was all. No signature; no date. Such was the dead man's last message.

I stood there astounded, jumping as if shot when a sudden puff of wind caused the lamp to flicker. It was easy enough to read between the lines of that letter. The writer of the letter had been injured, sick, and the other had started for the doctor, returning when his horse threw him. They had earlier quarreled over the division of the claim. Now the quarrel broke out afresh, the injured man charging that his partner had double-crossed him — had not been thrown from his horse at all; had not gone for the doctor; wanted him to die, in fact, so that he could have all the gold.

The quarrel had gone from words to blows, then to a gun fight in which both had been wounded. The other had made his escape, on the writer's horse probably, and the poor fellow here had ended his delirious days alone, deserted even by his dog. It was impossible for me to determine the elapsed time since all this had happened. Several days at least, or a week; perhaps even longer.

I turned from the letter to examine the body. One look at the face was enough to turn me sick with mingled loathing and pity. Mumified. The dry mountain air had done the work of embalming well. The flesh had shrunk and dried on the bones. It looked like leather; a peculiar, semi-transparent, brownish hide that somehow made one see pitiful pictures of starvation, misery, and lonely death. The huddled-up figure, the clothes bagging over the stack of bones, completed a doleful picture.

No, not completed. There was the rough shack of a cabin, ghostly in the flickering light of the tiny lamp. Just outside the cabin was the dog, a snarling threatening thing whose voice rose in menace at each move I made.

I could picture him, coming back every little while to the lonely cabin with the closed door; could see him leaping high at the window and, at a higher leap than usual, catching a glimpse of the bowed figure at the table, his master who would not answer his insistent calls. For hours he would prowl about outside, vainly trying to figure out the why of the closed door and the

lack of response to his urgent, pleading bark.

So "Nip" was his name. Well, I had given him a new name, one that suited him better, I thought. "Boss" he would always be to me.

I opened the door and called him. To "Boss" he made not the slightest response. Then I commanded sharply, "Nip, come here!"

He advanced a step or two into the room, looked questioningly at his dead master, then back at me. For a second I thought he would spring at my throat. The hair on his back bristled straight up, the muscles of his limbs and jaws grew tense as he gave a defiant growl. Then, as if the truth of the situation had penetrated his understanding, he came forward to the rude chair, sniffed inquiringly at the rigid legs, licked the one hand that hung stiff beside the chair. For a long minute he stood there, motionless as his master. Then with a look at me that seemed to say, "I'll remember you," he turned and trotted into the night.

Never a backward glance as he went out of the cabin, nor when I stood in the open door,

holding high the lamp in a vain effort to see where he had gone. "Back to his sheep," I told myself, "leaving me with his dead." A moment later from far down the ravine there came a mournful, long drawn howl, and its tone was one of utter melancholy. Guarding the flickering light with one hand, I silently closed the door.

What was I to do? When a man dies there are certain things to be done—in civilized communities at least. What was the proper thing here in the mountains?

"Easy enough," I decided. "Just leave things as they are. The poor fellow has gone so long without burying that a few more days won't do any harm. I'll soon have plenty of help. Old Thatch won't be long in getting on the right trail, and when he comes I'll have something to take care of besides dead men. There isn't a doubt in my mind that this poor chap is Big Jim's brother. Well, Big Jim will know when he comes, and I'd give a pretty if he'd come first."

I felt doubly sure that it was but a matter

of time until Jim would find this cabin. On reaching Mineral City he would find Shorty and no doubt worm some valuable information out of that simple-minded soul. Then, too, he would look up the records and see if his brother Tom had filed on any claim. If so, the location would be given and it would be a simple matter to come direct to the mine. If there had been no filing, and he found Shorty unwilling to talk, I felt sure he would watch Shorty and trail him, just as I had trailed Rawlins. Doubtless Jim was within a few miles of Shorty the night before when that gentleman had so unexpectedly stepped into the little affair that Thatch and I were conducting.

In the event Jim's trip to Mineral City was fruitless he would return to camp, and finding my note would long since be hot on my trail. His ability to trail any living thing was unquestioned. This latter circumstance deserved no consideration, for the dead man's letter declared that he had filed on the claim. This thought gave me a start.

Rawlins was a shrewd man. He would not

go blindly looking for a mine if he could determine its location from the records. Could it be that Rawlins had earlier found the mine and had slain the man who now sat so still at the table? Could he have written this letter and left it as a plant to cover up his crime? If there had been a filing, Rawlins would know it. Mayhap the dead man, in his delirium, had only fancied that he had filed on the claim, and perhaps after all Rawlins was really in the dark as to its exact location.

One question after another piled into my bewildered brain, until I had no hope of solving the many mysteries. However, I clung to the belief that Big Jim would soon arrive, and I could picture his surprise at finding me ahead of him.

I decided to make the best of a bad situation, and began to look about to see what I could find in the dead man's larder. I found an ample stock of canned goods, and there was flour, tea, sugar and bacon. The bacon was dry and mouldy on the outside, though the inner portion looked most appetizing. Having built

a tiny fire outside the cabin, I was soon feasting on broiled bacon and a can of cold beans that I had found in the larder. On second thought I decided to camp outside the cabin for the night. The air in the cabin was none too wholesome, and after three months in the open, walls and ceiling gave me a cooped-up feeling that I did not enjoy.

The camp site I selected lay back of the cabin, sheltered on two sides by big rocks and hidden from the cabin by a mound of earth whose freshness bespoke recent digging. Before turning in for the night I went back into the house for a short inspection. I had seen a rifle hanging above the table, and I had an idea that there would be cartridges for it somewhere about. I had less than a dozen shells left for my own gun, and if Rawlins and Shorty came—well, an extra round or two of ammunition might not come amiss.

The rifle was a thirty-two and would carry seven cartridges in the magazine and one in the chamber, as I discovered in my careful examination by the dying light of my fire. I

had found a full box of cartridges, and the rifle had three in it. A glance through the barrel showed that the gun had been fired since the last time it had been cleaned, which fit in pretty well with the fight told of in the letter.

Satisfied that I was rather well supplied with defensive armament, I rolled myself in my blanket beside the fire and was soon sound asleep, tired but well content with the way things had turned out for me. "In the morning," I murmured sleepily, "in the morning we'll see what kind of reception we can prepare for our two mine hunters."

In the morning it was too late.

When I awoke it was with a suddenness that banished all sleep. Traces of night still hung about and the sun was not above the horizon, although clouds would have hidden its yellow disk had it been up. Without knowing what it was, I realized that something must have awakened me. I lay there listening for a repetition of whatever it was. It was long in coming.

I had almost dropped back to sleep before I heard it again, and then at first I did not rec-

ognize the sound. It was different from anything I had ever heard before out in the open. It began with a muffled drone, then increased both in volume and pitch till it sounded for all the world like a high-powered saw cutting into knots. Then it would dwindle to the merest whisper; then silence. This was repeated a dozen times before I solved the mystery. I finally located it as coming from the cabin, or at least from that direction.

Then I tumbled. I nearly burst out laughing, though if I had it would have been no laughing matter. It was some one snoring!

Now there were just three people who might have been snoring at that time and place. Big Jim I at once ruled out, for I had never heard him snore. The other two were Shorty Winters and Rawlins.

Evidently, at least if my guess was right, they had not been so far behind me as I had figured. No doubt they had come upon the cabin sometime after I had fallen asleep, and had made camp there. I wondered if they had investigated the cabin and had discovered its

grewsome occupant. If so, had they left the body there? That I could soon find out. All I had to do was to see where they were sleeping.

Needless to say, I made no noise as I slipped out of my blankets. Picking up my own rifle, I hid the other one beneath a jutting corner of one of the big rocks and cautiously picked my way forward, keeping the cabin between me and the snoring sleeper. As soon as I was safe behind its shelter I solved one of my questions. They were not sleeping inside. Evidently they had found the dead man and preferred their own company while asleep.

As I drew near I solved another problem. There were two sleepers. The one snore was a gentle one, hardly to be heard when the real one cut loose. So it must be Shorty and Rawlins.

Now to risk a peep around the corner of the cabin to see just where they lay. Safe enough. Those snores certainly bespoke sound sleepers.

As I cautiously peeked around the cabin, a daring plan jumped into my mind. The cabin was stoutly built of logs, rough-hewn but closely joined. It was a regular fort. Once inside its

shelter I could stand off a dozen men. Not for a long siege, of course, but at least until Big Jim would arrive on the scene, which would hardly be more than a day longer. There was the question of water, to be sure, but there was a good stock of canned goods, each can with a little store of liquid I could drain out.

Then a real idea seized me. I knew that Rawlins and Shorty, like most ignorant men, were superstitious. I felt sure that they hadn't the slightest inkling of my presence. Suppose that I slipped inside the cabin, hid myself carefully, and then, when they came in — which they would shortly after they awoke — I would entertain them with a series of groans that would rival Thatch's loud snoring. The prospect seemed so amusing that a stifled laugh almost spoiled the plan in the beginning by waking my intended victims. Rawlins moved slightly, but after a prodigious yawn, settled back for another snooze.

That gave me my chance, although first I slipped back and got the rifle which I had taken from the cabin. No telling how long I would have to hold off my two rivals, and I didn't want

to run out of ammunition just when victory was within my reach. With both rifles clutched tightly, and walking on the balls of my feet, I crouched low and darted swiftly around the corner and through the door.

Safe! A hasty glance out the window told me that my entry had been unnoted. Now for a hiding place. I finally decided that the dark corner under and behind the table was the best, in fact there was no other hiding place in the tiny box-like room. I was well satisfied with this, for my groans would be all the more realistic coming from close to where the dead man sat.

It was a long wait before the sound of voices warned me that my two intended victims were astir and preparing breakfast. This served to remind me that the excitement of my discovery had driven all thoughts of food from my mind. Even so, I would have time enough to eat after the morning's entertainment. Still, the aroma of frying bacon and fragrant coffee that was wafted my way came pretty near being maddening. At last came the signal for which I had been waiting:

“ Well, Shorty, guess we’d better take a look over the morgue and see what the deceased has left to his heirs — heirs being us. Eh? ”

“ Ought to be some papers to tell whether he’s filed or not, anyhow.”

“ Papers nothin’! We’ll work this place without papers. When we get through anybody can file on it as wants to, far’s I’m concerned.”

“ You think it’s a pannin’ layout, then. Wonder which way she lays from the cabin, up or down.”

“ Both ways, more’n likely. Let’s have a look-see at the cabin.”

“ I ain’t stoppin’ ye. You shorely ain’t skeered of that dead man by daylight.”

“ Wasn’t scared last night. Just keerful, that’s all.”

Shorty laughed. I chuckled aloud at the thought of the fright that was coming to both. Then, as I heard the shuffle of footsteps, I crouched low behind the shelter of the table.

“ Nothin’ scary lookin’ ‘bout that, is there? ”

It was Rawlins speaking, and his matter-of-fact tone made me doubt the success of my plan.

“ Nope, nothin’ — but you go in first, Thatch.”

“ What you ‘fraid of? ”

“ Same thing you are. That man didn’t die natural, that’s all.”

“ What of it? He’s dead, aint he? ”

“ Shore. But the sperrits of men what die by vi’lence don’t rest easy, an’ no good ever come of haunted gold.”

Despite Rawlins’ sniff of disgust, I felt that now was the time to begin my good work. I groaned, deeply, agonizingly.

Rawlins was the first one to bolt away from the cabin door.

“ What’s that! ” The exclamation came from two throats, both shrill with alarm.

And then it was my turn to exclaim, for in Rawlins’ most everyday tones:

“ Shorty, le’s see your heels. There’s somebody gone in that door since that feller died. Somebody what wears rubber heels. Look at that print — it’s fresh.”

## CHAPTER IX

### THE MIDNIGHT BURIAL

That was the beginning of a lively time for me. Rawlins was essentially a man of action. Superstitious he might be, but that telltale heel print chased all the cobwebs out of his mind.

“Shorty,” he commanded, “take a look around the cabin an’ see ef there’s any way o’ gettin’ out ‘sides the winder an’ door. Then we’ll smoke out that ghost o’ yourn in short order.”

There was a brief silence as Shorty executed the command, then, “Nope.”

“All right. That grunt come from behint the corpse—under the table, more’n likely. Ain’t nobody passed that door sence I been here. I’ll watch the door whilst you see ef you kin find a crack clost to the table.”

I had a hunch that all this palaver was meant for my benefit. I listened intently, not for

sounds behind me, but in the opposite wall, the logical place for them to attack. Sure enough, I heard a slight tap-tap, as of someone digging cautiously at the hardened clay chinking. A little piece of mud plaster fell inside. I saw a tiny shaft of daylight stream through the crack. It was shut off, then clear again.

“All right, you, come out an’ show yerself. I’ve got ye covered.”

Impulsively I caught up my gun, aiming just a few feet to the right of where the voice had come from. I had no desire to commit murder, but I felt it was time to let them know that while I was no ghost, neither was I an easy victim. I pulled the trigger.

“Ouch!”

I knew I had not hit Rawlins, although a splinter from the edge of the log might have stung him. At any rate I felt sure that both he and Shorty had retired to a safe distance. A moment later I caught the mumble of their voices. After a long conference I heard the shuffle of approaching footsteps, then a soft, wheedling voice.

"I say, pard, what's the idea? Come on out an' show yerself. Ef you ain't got no more ag'in us than we have ag'in you, tain't no shootin' matter."

I tried to make my voice as hoarse and unrecognizable as possible as I replied: "All right, then, beat it. This is my property and I don't allow any trespassing. I'll give you five minutes to get out. After that I start shootin' and I won't aim to miss!" I put a special emphasis on that last.

"Neither do we." Rawlins was speaking. "We're two to one, an' it won't take long to smoke you out o' yore nest, so better come out peaceable an' we'll settle this thing friendly."

"One minute gone!" was my only answer.

"Don't fool yerself, young feller." I started in dismay. I had forgotten to disguise my voice in that last remark, and I knew that now Rawlins had identified me. "Don't fool yerself. It won't be a case o' spankin ef we have to yank you out of yore hole."

"Two minutes gone. No monkey business either, Rawlins, or I'll stop the clock on you.

“Big talk, kid.” Rawlins still, but he had moved to a different quarter. “I don’t know yer game, nor yore pardner’s game, but yore first victim in there is goin’ to be yore last far’s I’m consarned.”

“Three minutes gone!”

“Y’ought to git a job in the movies; you talk like a phonygraph. Better come on out afore we git real peaved. It’ll be lots easier fur ye.”

“Four minutes gone!”

There was no answer. I waited a little while, then, just for the sake of provoking an outburst from Rawlins, “Time’s up. Look out!”

Still silence. I heard vague rustlings without, but could not place them. For a moment I had a wild idea that they were setting the cabin on fire, but I concluded they would hardly do that, at least not until other methods had failed.

A shadow flitted across the tiny hole Rawlins had made. Bing! I fired, not with any real idea of hitting anything, but just to show them I was on the alert and meant business.

Bang! A return shot flattened itself against the logs a few feet from where I crouched.

Through the door, I figured. Wish I had it shut. Better try to shut it. Ouch — that was a close one. Maybe I'd better stay right where I am. If they come much closer to me I may have to pot one of them yet.

The firing had ceased. I waited a full ten minutes for further action and the suspense was beginning to tell on my nerves. Finally I got up enough courage to crawl out from behind the table and slip along the wall until I was back of the door. A quick fling and it was slammed shut. I waited a moment, figuring my action might draw their fire, then jumped to my feet and slammed the heavy bar in place.

Whew! That made me feel a bit more secure. I made a tour of inspection, finding in each wall of the room a chink hole that gave me a good view of the landscape. Not a soul in sight. I pondered this a little, then decided that it was only a ruse to get me to show myself. "Not so easy, my hearties. I'm going to bide in here till my reenforcements come. Then we'll give you a real battle. In the meantime, they say an army fights on its stomach, and this army's got

a full sized one that's crying for grub. Let's see what the larder holds."

I opened a can of beans, eating them cold and making no complaint because of that. As I finished the last spoonful a little piece of bark fell in my dish.

"Now what's the idea of that?" I questioned as I picked it up and inspected it. "Where there's a bark there should be a bite. Wonder if my ambitious friends plan calling on me by way of the roof."

I looked up. A tiny patch of blue sky greeted me. "Huh," I grunted. "Must be a squirrel up there. Guess I'd better see if I can bring him down."

I held my rifle stock between my knees and pointing the barrel straight upward, pulled the trigger. Wow! what a scrambling followed.

"I say, Rawlins," I jeered, "when I asked you to drop in on me some time I didn't mean for you to take it literally."

I heard a noise that sounded suspiciously like profanity, then all was silence once more, to be broken finally by a low, tense whisper: "Keep

down off that roof, you fool! He'll pot you like a pigeon." This from Rawlins.

I admit I should have been on my guard, but I did look up, only to realize the next instant that Rawlins had put one over on me, for at that moment came a sharp command:

"Reach for the sky, youngster, an' drop that popgun doin' it!" came from the window, and I turned to find myself staring into the muzzle of Rawlins' six-gun. "Now you open that door, an' just keep yore paws off of that rifle."

In a flash I realized that here was my chance. Once I was at the door, Rawlins could not see me. True, my rifle was in plain view and under the table, but just a few feet from the door was the dead man's rifle. While I was fumbling at the bar with one hand I could be reaching for the rifle with the other. Rawlins, expecting me to come out unarmed, would be caught unawares. With him in my power it would be an easy matter to dictate terms to Shorty.

All this in the space of a second as I stepped toward the door. I reached out, even before I took hold of the bar, and caught up the rifle.

Then I made a great pretense of trying to lift the bar.

"It sticks," I called. "Shove in on the door."

"Shove on the door, Shorty, whilst I watch the window. I think it's just a dodge to get a chance to grab back at his rifle."

Shorty shoved, the while I thought rapidly. If I could lay out Shorty, quickly, then turn my rifle on Rawlins, I would be in clover. But how? A jerk at the bar that raised it an inch. I might jerk the door open suddenly while he was bearing against it, hit him with the butt of the gun as he went sailing past. Another jerk at the bar; it was nearly clear. "Now, Shorty," I called, "*Push!*" and I raised the bar full and jerked in on the door.

It worked as planned. In flew the door, Shorty following it, completely unbalanced. My rifle followed the circle he made, catching him flush on the back of the head. Not so hard, really, but harder than I had intended. Down he went in a heap. Then I turned to confront Rawlins.

"Pretty neat, kid, but you still got me to reckon with."

He had me covered, and my rifle was still wrong-end-to.

“Yeh, I got you. Just drop that gun, too, an’ we’ll talk things over, with me doin’ most o’ the talkin’. All right, Shorty, you kin wake up now. Them ain’t birds you hear singin’. Here’s the bird made you lissen to his chirpin’. Get a rope an’ we’ll tie his wings.”

“Hold on, Thatch,” it was a *new voice*. “Maybe you’ve heard the old saying about birds of a feather flocking together. Here’s an old crow that’s got a little bone to pick with you about this wing tying business.”

It was Big Jim! We had all been so engrossed in our little party that we had not noticed his approach. Now he came leisurely forward, his automatic held carelessly in his hand but very evidently ready for business at the first suspicious move on Rawlins’ part. Rawlins no longer had me covered, having half turned toward Big Jim. On the other hand I had taken advantage of his turning away to pick up my rifle and point it toward Shorty, though he did not appear to need much covering, being satis-

fied to squat on the floor and rub the back of his head.

“What say, Rawlins? Ready to park your guns?

“Here, Tod, take his shooting irons — well, all right, pick up Shorty’s first. Now, Rawlins, you’re next. Bring ‘em over here Tod, and we’ll take out their stingers.”

He broke the guns and took out the cartridges, then handed them back to their owners, Shorty having come out of the cabin, rubbing his head and looking sheepish enough.

“All right, men, let’s sit down and talk things over. Maybe we can save a fight yet,” said Big Jim.

“Look here, Mister, I don’t see why-come you have to butt in. We’re law-abidin’ miners out here to locate a claim, an’ you ain’t got no right — ”

“Maybe we’re out here to locate a claim, too. It happens that the claim you’re standing on right now belongs to my brother. Yes, Shorty, I saw through your lies quick enough. Maybe the man you nursed and who gave you the

nugget wasn't my brother, but just the same this claim right here is filed in his name."

"I didn't tell you no lies," answered Shorty sullenly. "The feller what come to me was just like I said he was."

"You saw Shorty in Mineral City?" I asked, and Jim nodded. "Tell me something Jim, was your brother kind of tall and slim?"

"Not when I last saw him," he replied, an eager light in his eyes. "He was heavier than I, but not quite so tall. Why?"

"With a scar on his forehead, left side?" I went on, ignoring his question.

"No, not that I know of. What's the idea?"

"Look inside the cabin!"

Jim stepped inside, followed by all of us. There was a minute's pause, then one broken, halting word—

"Tom!"

I stepped back out of the cabin, and after a little hesitation the other two followed me. Big Jim remained inside all of half an hour. When he came out his face was calm but his eyes looked misty and his voice was strangely hushed.

“ Tod, it’s my poor brother, Tom. I have found him — too late! ”

I had no word to say, but I came over and gripped his hand and we walked a short distance away from the other two. Neither of us spoke until we were well out of hearing of Shorty and Rawlins. Then Jim broke the long silence, his voice natural again.

“ I have expected it ever since I heard Shorty’s story.”

“ I didn’t think you had seen him — didn’t think you’d have had time — ”

“ He lit right out to warn Rawlins soon’s I was out of sight. I tried not to show my hand, but it was pretty hard to get him to open up without telling him a few things. He beat me here because he knew the way, while I had to guess it — until I ran across his trail at least.”

“ How about my trail? ” I asked.

“ Saw it but didn’t follow. I knew you’d be all right. I could look you up in case you didn’t locate the mine. And then I wasn’t dead sure it was yours. I left you back in camp, you know. But it wasn’t my brother who gave Shorty the

nugget. That fact nearly threw me off the track. It was Tom's partner, a fellow named Barnes — ”

“ A ticket-of-leave chap from England,” I interrupted.

“ What do you know about ticket-o'-leave men? ” asked Jim quizzically.

“ I have a letter your brother wrote — or rather there's a letter back yonder in the cabin that he wrote just before he died.”

“ Oh, I see. And it tells about this partner? ” Jim asked the question rather sharply, it struck me at the time, and I later had reason to recall this circumstance. I can't explain why I answered as I did just then; perhaps it was another of my wild guesses that was to come true. Perhaps it was because, way down in my heart, I was sure that Big Jim had read that letter when he was alone in the cabin.

“ I wouldn't call him a partner! ” I said.

“ There's a riddle for a fellow if he had time to puzzle it out, but we haven't. By this time our two friends back there will have re-loaded their six-guns. So that's a condition we

will have to face. Not that it worries me. The mine is filed in Tom's name, and all I will have to do will be to establish my identity and take it over and develop it. In the meantime you can be panning it out and come in for a share."

"You're paying me a salary now, Jim."

"That doesn't cover gold mining, which you will find is no Sunday school picnic even if our friends don't give us any further trouble. We'll discuss this share business later. Just now I expect we'd better hike back and see what terms Rawlins wants to make."

So we went back, on the alert for any suspicious move but outwardly expecting no trouble. Rawlins had been in the cabin. He was just emerging from the door as we came in sight, no doubt warned of our approach by Shorty, who was on the watch.

"Well, men," began Jim casually, "what say? Do we bury the hatchet and part friends?"

"Me an' Shorty's been talkin' it over," drawled Rawlins, his tone as careless as Jim's had been. "We just about decided to stake our own claims. I been in the game long enough

to figger that all the gold ain't in one shovelfull, an' we got jist as much right to pan as you or anybody else."

"True enough," agreed Jim. "I might mention, however, that there's three claims staked here, and filed on, too; the one above and the one below discovery. Tod Vance here holds one of them and I hold the other, though," with a laugh, "for the life of me I couldn't tell you which is which."

"All right, buddie, set yer stakes an' start pannin'. We're stakin' on each side of you, above an' below. What's yer handle, by the way? "

"People who know me call me Jim. Raily's the rest of it."

"Feller in yonder's name's Barnes," remarked Shorty, jerking his thumb toward the cabin.

"Huh!" exclaimed Jim and Rawlins together. As for me, I looked at the three of them in turn, vaguely feeling that something unexpected had happened.

"Sure," went on Shorty glibly. "I seen

him before. He's the feller what tol' me about this place. Plumb off his nut, he was, but he knew his own name all right."

" You never tol' me his name was Barnes! " This from Rawlins.

" If I tol' you all I know we'd both need more lives'n a cat. Shorty knows."

" Undoubtedly," dryly from Jim. " On the other hand, it's barely possible that I know my own brother. His partner's name was Barnes — Jim Barnes. He lit out after they'd had a fight."

I could barely repress a start. Now I *knew* he had read the letter. Of course he had a right to do so, but why had he pretended not to have read it?

" Name's Barnes," repeated Shorty. " Tol' me so hisself. Pardner's name's Raily. Raily puts it over on him an files the claim in his own name. Barnes's out of his head, sets out after him. That's when he comes to my shack. All he can talk about's the mine an' the doctor an' the dirty trick what's been played on him."

" How long ago was this? " I demanded,

feeling that I had a right to settle some of the doubts and suspicions that were rising in my mind.

“What month’s this—July? It was in May then, about the middle part, mebbe. This feller’s pardner yer brother, you say?”

Jim’s face was a study, to me and to the other two. He paused a moment before replying.

“I hope you get this story straight, Shorty, and you, too, Thatch. The dead man there in the cabin is—was—my brother, Tom Raily. His partner was Barnes. They evidently had had some quarrel. How it started I don’t know, but I can imagine. They weren’t really partners; Tom had the other fellow hired to go along. Naturally he didn’t expect to share whatever they found. The other fellow did, after they found something worth while. Up to that time he’d been satisfied to draw his wages and call it enough, but the sight of the rich pannings was too much for him.

“What does he do then? I can tell you, or just about. He hikes out at dead of night to file the claim in his own name. Tom misses him,

suspects the truth and sets out after him. Barnes' horse slips and in the fall Barnes gets hurt, so he sneaks back to the cabin, finding Tom gone. Tom, of course, goes on and files on the claim.

"Then Tom comes back, but he is a sick man. They patch up their quarrel and proceed to pan gold. There's a cave-in and Tom is hurt. He sends Barnes for the doctor, but Barnes turns traitor and comes back without one. Tom gets worse, delirious, way out of his head. Sets out for the doctor himself, loses his way, a good many times maybe, and stumbles into Shorty's shack.

"Shorty, not realizing how delirious the man's mind is, misunderstands his ravings of Barnes and his wrongs and thinks that he is Barnes himself. Simple enough, isn't it?"

"Simple enough," agreed Rawlins.

Shorty said nothing, but his silence was eloquent. He was unconvinced. Strangely enough, I, too, was not so sure. Like Shorty, I held my peace. I wanted to ask Jim why he had not stuck to the story that was told in that disconnected

letter. Yes, there were a good many questions I wanted to ask Big Jim, but I could not bring myself to utter them.

That was a queer sort of day to me. On the surface all was friendliness among the four of us. Yet Shorty, I knew, harbored a very definite suspicion of some sort against Jim. Rawlins, I was just as sure, was watching my partner as a cat does a mouse; and I—well, of them all I was probably the most miserable, for I did not know just what I did think.

Somehow we worried through the day, eating together at dusk, having set our stakes and made preparations to begin real mining in the morning. As we finished eating, Rawlins remarked:

“Sorry, Raily, but your cabin’s on my claim.”

“You can have it,” said Jim shortly. “I’ll take out what I want in the morning. Want to sleep in there to-night?”

Rawlins grunted a denial.

“Tod and I will sleep just outside, if you don’t mind,” said Jim. “To-morrow we’ll straighten up things—or at least I will.”

I wondered if that last remark had reference to the body of his brother. Then I wondered why, before all else, the body had not been buried. I tried to figure out the answer, but finally gave it up. "Jim's afraid to," I decided. "Afraid to — but why? Rawlins knows; I don't."

I slept fitfully, waking with a start a dozen times. I had a feeling that someone was waiting for me to fall sound asleep. Who? Jim? Rawlins? Shorty I dismissed as not counting. About midnight I sat up, wide awake. I knew without looking that Jim was gone. I lay there awaiting his return, thankful that the moon was high and bright enough to give me a clear view of all about me.

I lay there perhaps half an hour, almost dozing off two or three times, instantly forcing my eyes open again. Then came a cautious footstep. Jim was returning. He came close beside me, regarding me intently for a long minute. Assured that I had not awakened, he slipped over to his blankets and crawled in. In a little while his peaceful breathing told me that he was sound

asleep, so I, too, settled back, and soon slept.

When I awoke it was still misty-gray, but Jim was up and had the fire snapping briskly. As I sat up he glanced around, grinned and remarked lightly, "Your snoring kept the sun from showing up; it's overdue an hour. There she shows now."

"Night noises kept me from resting," I grunted.

"Oh!" he said sharply, "did you hear them, too?"

"Them? Who?"

Jim jerked his head toward where Rawlins and Thatch had made their camp, then grimly added: "They carried off the body last night!"

"Buried it?"

"Ask them, if you want to hear them deny it. I followed them but they lost me."

I made no comment, although there was a question on the tip of my tongue. A smear of wet clay was on Jim's bare forearm. It had not been there the night before for it was not yet wholly dry.

Into my mind came a flood of questions, none

easy to answer, some filling me with doubt, and some of them were even accusing. Why had Jim followed Rawlins and Shorty alone? Why hadn't he called me?

I knew that he had a great confidence in his own ability to do a thing alone, yet of late he had been willing enough to call on me to help. Now, in his darkest hour, when men none too friendly were making off with the body of his brother, he had — by his own word — followed them alone. They had lost him; yet on his arm was a smear of wet clay.

“ Jim Raily,” I put the query to myself, “ did you get that clay mark following — or digging?”

## CHAPTER X

### BIG JIM'S DARK DAY

"Where's Rawlins?" I asked Shorty a half hour later as I passed their camp on the way to our diggings.

"Mineral City," grunted Shorty, busy over a skillet of bacon. "File on our claims. Back to-morrow, mebbe."

"What were you two doing last night at the cabin?" I demanded abruptly.

Shorty stared blankly. "Cabin?" he repeated.

"Sure. About midnight."

"Don't walk in my sleep," he snorted. "One thing at a time Shorty does. Sleep at night; think in daytime. 'Swhy people think I'm queer."

Somehow I had no thought of doubting Shorty's sincerity. It had been Rawlins then—or had it? I pondered this last as I walked to

where our shovels lay, two of them, the property of the man who had died and the one who had fled. I picked up mine mechanically, then stared in sudden realization. I had learned one lesson while living at home; all tools must be put away clean.

There was clay — yellow clay — on my shovel.

"I wish," I said with significant emphasis as Jim came to the claim a few minutes later, "I wish that you would use your own shovel after this. I like to start in clean with mine in the morning."

I did not look at him as I spoke, but I was sure that he heard me, although he made no answer. That was the beginning of a work day that was as miserable as any I have ever spent. I have always taken joy in work; in the play of muscles bent to a hard task. There was none of that in this day. Suspicion and joy cannot live in the same mind, and I was suspicious. There were many things I could not understand, and I was greatly puzzled over Jim.

Of Shorty we saw nothing at all. We had brought our supplies to the diggings, piling them

in the opening of a shaft that had been started in the hillside, timbered roughly against a cave-in. We built a fireplace of great stones and cooked dinner and supper there. It was well after dark, Jim's pipe lighting his face as he puffed idly, when he arose abruptly.

"Guess I'll have a look-see at our neighbors before we turn in."

"Make it singular and you'll have it."

"Huh?"

"Only one neighbor. Rawlins went to Mineral City last night to file on the claims."

"Last night!"

"Just after dark," I said, casually as I could, waiting tensely for his answer. Jim said not a word, but strode off into the darkness.

"Jim, old pal," I groaned inwardly, "I'm trying hard to keep on believing in you, but hang it all, man, you sure do give my faith some awful jolts."

When Jim came back, an hour later, I had rolled in the blankets and pretended to be asleep. He came over and stood above me a long minute. In the flickering light of our fire I could see him

solemnly shake his head, then slouch over to where his blankets were already unrolled. He bunched them up again, then sat down on the heap, leaning his chin in his hand, elbow on knees. As long as I lay awake he was still sitting there.

I was awakened by the babble of excited voices. Still half asleep, I recognized the high-pitched tones of Shorty, the angry drawl of Rawlins, and the bumble of a voice that was new to my ear. My eyes still shut, I listened for the voice of Jim. When it came, the words were so startling that I jumped to my feet in one bound.

“ You can’t arrest me on such wild evidence as that! ”

“ You seem to forget ” — it was the bumble voice, and the speaker was a well-fed looking person whose smooth face seemed to express good nature and self-satisfaction at the same time — “ you seem to forget that you are already arrested. The wildness of the evidence is no concern of mine. I’m only the sheriff, you know, and we have judges and juries for the purpose of considering the evidence. I have here a

warrant, duly executed, charging you with being one Tom Raily, the murderer of one James Barnes. The mere fact that you claim to be *James* Raily, and insist that the deceased is your brother, has, so far as my warrant goes, no bearing on the case. Neither has the fact that the body has disappeared."

Needless to say, I was dumfounded. Jim—or was he Jim—a murderer? In the light of that great question all minor questions seemed to disappear. I looked at the man standing there before his three accusers, straight and tall, clear-eyed as a child. Somehow, the mere sight of him told me the idea was absurd, inspired me with a new confidence, banished all my earlier doubts and suspicions.

In the very foxiness of the half-wit Shorty; in the evil triumph of the gambler Rawlins; in the smug cocksureness of the sheriff, I saw positive proof of the innocence of my friend. My friend now for always, for I could never again doubt him.

"Jim," I said, "tell him where you saw these two crooks hide your brother's body."

"If I did, buddie, they'd swear they saw me hide it there, and there are two of them. There's just one fortunate thing about it. Shorty, where'd you lose that nugget you showed Rawlins in order to get him to come to the mine? "

A crafty look came over Shorty's face. "Don't know where I lost it, but I know durned well I missed it jist atter we et supper with you last night. I tol' Thatch about it at the time. Buried it with the corpse, did ye? "

"I saw it fall out of your pocket as you stooped over the body there at the grave," coldly answered Jim. "Fortunately it is a simple matter for me to prove my identity. There are my passport papers—I am a Britisher, you know—and my correspondence is rather ample. While I have with me no letters from my brother, except his last, which we found under his dead hands, I at least have this young man, who has been with me every day for the last two months."

"Barnes's been dead over two months," mumbled Shorty.

"It's a lie!" exclaimed Jim. "If you hadn't

buried the body that fact could easily have been determined."

"All right, men, let's save the oratory for the trial," said the sheriff. "I've had a hard, quick trip up here and the altitude gets on my nerves. If you're ready, Raily, we'll get back to civilization instanter."

"Will you let me have a word in private with this young man?"

"In private? Dunno as I will. Have all the words you want though while I'm listening. So shoot, but shoot fast."

"Tod, how much of this stuff do you believe?" asked Jim, turning to me.

"Not a word — now. I'll admit that I thought something wasn't exactly straight, but nothing like this. I'm for you, Jim, all the way through, and here's my hand on it."

"Good boy!" and he caught my hand in a vigorous clasp, so vigorous that I winced as something hard was pressed into my palm. "Never fear, lad, this mess will soon be cleared up. I have nothing to say to you in private that I can't say in public, though I admit that I

like to pick my public. Here's what I want you to do:

"Stick around here and keep an eye on our claims. Rawlins here is the most notorious claim-jumper in the States; keep your gun handy. Shorty is square as a die, but just now he's tied up with a crook. He won't stand for any raw stuff, though. He honestly thinks I am what he thinks I am. You stay here until the trial; I'll send you word when to come, or you can watch Rawlins. He couldn't stay away from it any more than a fly could stay away from a dead hog.

"That's all, Tod, except stay by the old ship while she weathers the storm. You've got to hold the tiller now for awhile, but at least I've given you a chart of the course."

That last undoubtedly was pure Greek to the three listeners, but that hard something in my hand told me the meaning of his "chart" at least.

"Rawlins," commanded the sheriff, "I leave you and Shorty in charge of the evidence. As soon as I reach Mineral City I'll send back some deputies to make a search for the body. I

want you to give them all the help in your power; I'll see that you are properly rewarded. Ready?" to Jim. "All right, let's meander."

"Remember, Jim, I'm trusting you," I called by way of good-bye.

"I'm trusting you too, Tod," and then the two moved up the banks of the ravine. Shortly after they had disappeared the whinny of a horse told that the sheriff did not intend to reduce his fat by walking.

"Who is the human balloon?" I asked Rawlins.

"Sheriff of Rock County; name's Douglass. He's a fathead, all right, but he's got the right party this time. We've got the goods on that friend o' yours an' if he don't swing fer it I miss my guess, eh Shorty?"

I merely snorted.

"Them fine words you two swapped ain't goin' to have much weight with the twelve good men an' true," taunted Rawlins.

"Dry up, you croaker. If the rope had its deserts you'd have swung a long while ago. If you're out here to mine you'd better get busy

with the pick and shovel. Your night shoveling won't get you much."

With that I picked up my own tools and set to work, though I could not resist a parting word. "After you leave, this place is private property, and the 'keep out' sign works night and day."

A growl from Rawlins and a squawk from Shorty was the only reply as the two moved away. I was glad they left quickly, for my knowledge of mining was extremely limited and I wanted no spectators. Then, too, there was another and more urgent reason. There was that hard something that Jim had pressed into my palm.

When the two were safely out of sight I pulled it from my pocket. It was a letter, but not from Jim. Twice I read it through before I could place it, and then it was the handwriting that I recognized. Here it is:

"picture of his mother. You will be glad to know that I saved the strain. The sire comes of the best breed in north Scotland. Queer to find it here in the States. Poor old Flossie;

she followed 'mony a weary mile,' as the old song used to say. And now the pup, though he's well-nigh past that, bids fair to nose my heels another generation. Oh, well, 'tis a hope I have that some day I'll bring him 'hame to ye' to take the place of the one I never meant should follow me away. He's a dream of a dog, and for tracking there's no better. He'll pen anything that wears hide or horns, and he's true to the death. If anything happens to me I want you to have him."

I must confess that my eyes were wet when I had finished reading. Here I had been thinking myself a part of some grand plot, some desperate scheme to foil our enemies. I had thought the stealthily passed message a bit of incriminating evidence or a clew to lead us to safety, only to discover that it was only a bit of sentiment! Sentiment in an hour filled with plot and counter-plot!

Then I began thinking hard. Jim must have had a reason for slipping it to me so furtively, or for giving it to me at all. I wondered where he had found it. In the cabin, probably. Of

course it had been written by the dead man, addressed to Jim, and it referred to the dog, Nip — as the dead man had called him — Boss, as I had renamed him.

In the end I concluded that Jim had taken this way of convincing me that the dead man really was his brother, trusting that I would recognize the handwriting as the same. That gave me another idea. Perhaps he had wanted me to hunt for the dog. "True to the death," the letter had said. Well, death had come, and no doubt Jim had spent a great deal of time in wondering what had become of the dog.

That was what made the misty feeling come to my eyes. Jim was taking this way of asking me to find for him the one living thing that had loved his brother.

Did you ever, in the midst of some worrying problem, have the answer come to you with the clearness and the suddenness of a flash of lightning? With some such suddenness came the answer to my problem — mine and Jim's. Not all the answer right then, but at least the idea that was to lead to the answer.

My first step was to put away my tools, pack up such food as we had salvaged from the cabin, hide my own rifle, for which I had no more ammunition, and pick up the one I had found in the cabin. With that under my arm I walked toward where I expected to find the two men. I had some hopes of finding the cabin unguarded, so that I might make a thorough search for more evidence, but the first step toward the door brought a warning shout from Rawlins.

"Keep away from there, kid. I'm in charge of that place till the deputies come, an' I don't want no tamperin' with the contents."

"Oh, all right," I answered carelessly, walking toward them.

"Where away, all dolled up with a stolen rifle?" jeered Rawlins.

"I'd tell you I was going to town if I thought you'd believe me. As it is, I don't know that it's any of your business."

"It may be afore you get through with this case," observed Rawlins dryly. "I expect you'd better make yore get-away afore the dep'ties gits here, which won't be afore mornin'."

“Big talk, kid.” Rawlins still, but he had moved to a different quarter. “I don’t know yer game, nor yore pardner’s game, but yore first victim in there is goin’ to be yore last far’s I’m consarned.”

“Three minutes gone!”

“Y’ought to git a job in the movies; you talk like a phonygraph. Better come on out afore we git real peaved. It’ll be lots easier fur ye.”

“Four minutes gone!”

There was no answer. I waited a little while, then, just for the sake of provoking an outburst from Rawlins, “Time’s up. Look out!”

Still silence. I heard vague rustlings without, but could not place them. For a moment I had a wild idea that they were setting the cabin on fire, but I concluded they would hardly do that, at least not until other methods had failed.

A shadow flitted across the tiny hole Rawlins had made. Bing! I fired, not with any real idea of hitting anything, but just to show them I was on the alert and meant business.

Bang! A return shot flattened itself against the logs a few feet from where I crouched.

Through the door, I figured. Wish I had it shut. Better try to shut it. Ouch — that was a close one. Maybe I'd better stay right where I am. If they come much closer to me I may have to pot one of them yet.

The firing had ceased. I waited a full ten minutes for further action and the suspense was beginning to tell on my nerves. Finally I got up enough courage to crawl out from behind the table and slip along the wall until I was back of the door. A quick fling and it was slammed shut. I waited a moment, figuring my action might draw their fire, then jumped to my feet and slammed the heavy bar in place.

Whew! That made me feel a bit more secure. I made a tour of inspection, finding in each wall of the room a chink hole that gave me a good view of the landscape. Not a soul in sight. I pondered this a little, then decided that it was only a ruse to get me to show myself. "Not so easy, my hearties. I'm going to bide in here till my reenforcements come. Then we'll give you a real battle. In the meantime, they say an army fights on its stomach, and this army's got

a full sized one that's crying for grub. Let's see what the larder holds."

I opened a can of beans, eating them cold and making no complaint because of that. As I finished the last spoonful a little piece of bark fell in my dish.

"Now what's the idea of that?" I questioned as I picked it up and inspected it. "Where there's a bark there should be a bite. Wonder if my ambitious friends plan calling on me by way of the roof."

I looked up. A tiny patch of blue sky greeted me. "Huh," I grunted. "Must be a squirrel up there. Guess I'd better see if I can bring him down."

I held my rifle stock between my knees and pointing the barrel straight upward, pulled the trigger. Wow! what a scrambling followed.

"I say, Rawlins," I jeered, "when I asked you to drop in on me some time I didn't mean for you to take it literally."

I heard a noise that sounded suspiciously like profanity, then all was silence once more, to be broken finally by a low, tense whisper: "Keep

down off that roof, you fool! He'll pot you like a pigeon." This from Rawlins.

I admit I should have been on my guard, but I did look up, only to realize the next instant that Rawlins had put one over on me, for at that moment came a sharp command:

"Reach for the sky, youngster, an' drop that popgun doin' it!" came from the window, and I turned to find myself staring into the muzzle of Rawlins' six-gun. "Now you open that door, an' just keep yore paws off of that rifle."

In a flash I realized that here was my chance. Once I was at the door, Rawlins could not see me. True, my rifle was in plain view and under the table, but just a few feet from the door was the dead man's rifle. While I was fumbling at the bar with one hand I could be reaching for the rifle with the other. Rawlins, expecting me to come out unarmed, would be caught unawares. With him in my power it would be an easy matter to dictate terms to Shorty.

All this in the space of a second as I stepped toward the door. I reached out, even before I took hold of the bar, and caught up the rifle.

Then I made a great pretense of trying to lift the bar.

"It sticks," I called. "Shove in on the door."

"Shove on the door, Shorty, whilst I watch the window. I think it's just a dodge to get a chance to grab back at his rifle."

Shorty shoved, the while I thought rapidly. If I could lay out Shorty, quickly, then turn my rifle on Rawlins, I would be in clover. But how? A jerk at the bar that raised it an inch. I might jerk the door open suddenly while he was bearing against it, hit him with the butt of the gun as he went sailing past. Another jerk at the bar; it was nearly clear. "Now, Shorty," I called, "*Push!*" and I raised the bar full and jerked in on the door.

It worked as planned. In flew the door, Shorty following it, completely unbalanced. My rifle followed the circle he made, catching him flush on the back of the head. Not so hard, really, but harder than I had intended. Down he went in a heap. Then I turned to confront Rawlins.

"Pretty neat, kid, but you still got me to reckon with."

He had me covered, and my rifle was still wrong-end-to.

“Yeh, I got you. Just drop that gun, too, an’ we’ll talk things over, with me doin’ most o’ the talkin’. All right, Shorty, you kin wake up now. Them ain’t birds you hear singin’. Here’s the bird made you listen to his chirpin’. Get a rope an’ we’ll tie his wings.”

“Hold on, Thatch,” it was a *new voice*. “Maybe you’ve heard the old saying about birds of a feather flocking together. Here’s an old crow that’s got a little bone to pick with you about this wing tying business.”

It was Big Jim! We had all been so engrossed in our little party that we had not noticed his approach. Now he came leisurely forward, his automatic held carelessly in his hand but very evidently ready for business at the first suspicious move on Rawlins’ part. Rawlins no longer had me covered, having half turned toward Big Jim. On the other hand I had taken advantage of his turning away to pick up my rifle and point it toward Shorty, though he did not appear to need much covering, being satis-

fied to squat on the floor and rub the back of his head.

“ What say, Rawlins? Ready to park your guns?

“ Here, Tod, take his shooting irons — well, all right, pick up Shorty’s first. Now, Rawlins, you’re next. Bring ’em over here Tod, and we’ll take out their stingers.”

He broke the guns and took out the cartridges, then handed them back to their owners, Shorty having come out of the cabin, rubbing his head and looking sheepish enough.

“ All right, men, let’s sit down and talk things over. Maybe we can save a fight yet,” said Big Jim.

“ Look here, Mister, I don’t see why-come you have to butt in. We’re law-abidin’ miners out here to locate a claim, an’ you ain’t got no right — ”

“ Maybe we’re out here to locate a claim, too. It happens that the claim you’re standing on right now belongs to my brother. Yes, Shorty, I saw through your lies quick enough. Maybe the man you nursed and who gave you the

nugget wasn't my brother, but just the same this claim right here is filed in his name."

"I didn't tell you no lies," answered Shorty sullenly. "The feller what come to me was just like I said he was."

"You saw Shorty in Mineral City?" I asked, and Jim nodded. "Tell me something Jim, was your brother kind of tall and slim?"

"Not when I last saw him," he replied, an eager light in his eyes. "He was heavier than I, but not quite so tall. Why?"

"With a scar on his forehead, left side?" I went on, ignoring his question.

"No, not that I know of. What's the idea?"

"Look inside the cabin!"

Jim stepped inside, followed by all of us. There was a minute's pause, then one broken, halting word—

"Tom!"

I stepped back out of the cabin, and after a little hesitation the other two followed me. Big Jim remained inside all of half an hour. When he came out his face was calm but his eyes looked misty and his voice was strangely hushed.

“ Tod, it’s my poor brother, Tom. I have found him — too late! ”

I had no word to say, but I came over and gripped his hand and we walked a short distance away from the other two. Neither of us spoke until we were well out of hearing of Shorty and Rawlins. Then Jim broke the long silence, his voice natural again.

“ I have expected it ever since I heard Shorty’s story.”

“ I didn’t think you had seen him — didn’t think you’d have had time — ”

“ He lit right out to warn Rawlins soon’s I was out of sight. I tried not to show my hand, but it was pretty hard to get him to open up without telling him a few things. He beat me here because he knew the way, while I had to guess it — until I ran across his trail at least.”

“ How about my trail? ” I asked.

“ Saw it but didn’t follow. I knew you’d be all right. I could look you up in case you didn’t locate the mine. And then I wasn’t dead sure it was yours. I left you back in camp, you know. But it wasn’t my brother who gave Shorty the

nugget. That fact nearly threw me off the track. It was Tom's partner, a fellow named Barnes — ”

“A ticket-of-leave chap from England,” I interrupted.

“What do you know about ticket-o'-leave men?” asked Jim quizzically.

“I have a letter your brother wrote — or rather there's a letter back yonder in the cabin that he wrote just before he died.”

“Oh, I see. And it tells about this partner?” Jim asked the question rather sharply, it struck me at the time, and I later had reason to recall this circumstance. I can't explain why I answered as I did just then; perhaps it was another of my wild guesses that was to come true. Perhaps it was because, way down in my heart, I was sure that Big Jim had read that letter when he was alone in the cabin.

“I wouldn't call him a partner!” I said.

“There's a riddle for a fellow if he had time to puzzle it out, but we haven't. By this time our two friends back there will have re-loaded their six-guns. So that's a condition we

will have to face. Not that it worries me. The mine is filed in Tom's name, and all I will have to do will be to establish my identity and take it over and develop it. In the meantime you can be panning it out and come in for a share."

"You're paying me a salary now, Jim."

"That doesn't cover gold mining, which you will find is no Sunday school picnic even if our friends don't give us any further trouble. We'll discuss this share business later. Just now I expect we'd better hike back and see what terms Rawlins wants to make."

So we went back, on the alert for any suspicious move but outwardly expecting no trouble. Rawlins had been in the cabin. He was just emerging from the door as we came in sight, no doubt warned of our approach by Shorty, who was on the watch.

"Well, men," began Jim casually, "what say? Do we bury the hatchet and part friends?"

"Me an' Shorty's been talkin' it over," drawled Rawlins, his tone as careless as Jim's had been. "We just about decided to stake our own claims. I been in the game long enough

to figger that all the gold ain't in one shovelfull, an' we got jist as much right to pan as you or anybody else."

"True enough," agreed Jim. "I might mention, however, that there's three claims staked here, and filed on, too; the one above and the one below discovery. Tod Vance here holds one of them and I hold the other, though," with a laugh, "for the life of me I couldn't tell you which is which."

"All right, buddie, set yer stakes an' start pannin'. We're stakin' on each side of you, above an' below. What's yer handle, by the way? "

"People who know me call me Jim. Raily's the rest of it."

"Feller in yonder's name's Barnes," remarked Shorty, jerking his thumb toward the cabin.

"Huh!" exclaimed Jim and Rawlins together. As for me, I looked at the three of them in turn, vaguely feeling that something unexpected had happened.

"Sure," went on Shorty glibly. "I seen

him before. He's the feller what tol' me about this place. Plumb off his nut, he was, but he knew his own name all right."

" You never tol' me his name was Barnes!"  
This from Rawlins.

" If I tol' you all I know we'd both need more lives'n a cat. Shorty knows."

" Undoubtedly," dryly from Jim. " On the other hand, it's barely possible that I know my own brother. His partner's name was Barnes—Jim Barnes. He lit out after they'd had a fight."

I could barely repress a start. Now I *knew* he had read the letter. Of course he had a right to do so, but why had he pretended not to have read it?

" Name's Barnes," repeated Shorty. " Tol' me so hisself. Pardner's name's Raily. Raily puts it over on him an files the claim in his own name. Barnes's out of his head, sets out after him. That's when he comes to my shack. All he can talk about's the mine an' the doctor an' the dirty trick what's been played on him."

" How long ago was this?" I demanded,

feeling that I had a right to settle some of the doubts and suspicions that were rising in my mind.

“What month’s this — July? It was in May then, about the middle part, mebbe. This feller’s pardner yer brother, you say? ”

Jim’s face was a study, to me and to the other two. He paused a moment before replying.

“I hope you get this story straight, Shorty, and you, too, Thatch. The dead man there in the cabin is — was — my brother, Tom Raily. His partner was Barnes. They evidently had had some quarrel. How it started I don’t know, but I can imagine. They weren’t really partners; Tom had the other fellow hired to go along. Naturally he didn’t expect to share whatever they found. The other fellow did, after they found something worth while. Up to that time he’d been satisfied to draw his wages and call it enough, but the sight of the rich pannings was too much for him.

“What does he do then? I can tell you, or just about. He hikes out at dead of night to file the claim in his own name. Tom misses him,

suspects the truth and sets out after him. Barnes' horse slips and in the fall Barnes gets hurt, so he sneaks back to the cabin, finding Tom gone. Tom, of course, goes on and files on the claim.

"Then Tom comes back, but he is a sick man. They patch up their quarrel and proceed to pan gold. There's a cave-in and Tom is hurt. He sends Barnes for the doctor, but Barnes turns traitor and comes back without one. Tom gets worse, delirious, way out of his head. Sets out for the doctor himself, loses his way, a good many times maybe, and stumbles into Shorty's shack.

"Shorty, not realizing how delirious the man's mind is, misunderstands his ravings of Barnes and his wrongs and thinks that he is Barnes himself. Simple enough, isn't it? "

"Simple enough," agreed Rawlins.

Shorty said nothing, but his silence was eloquent. He was unconvinced. Strangely enough, I, too, was not so sure. Like Shorty, I held my peace. I wanted to ask Jim why he had not stuck to the story that was told in that disconnected

letter. Yes, there were a good many questions I wanted to ask Big Jim, but I could not bring myself to utter them.

That was a queer sort of day to me. On the surface all was friendliness among the four of us. Yet Shorty, I knew, harbored a very definite suspicion of some sort against Jim. Rawlins, I was just as sure, was watching my partner as a cat does a mouse; and I—well, of them all I was probably the most miserable, for I did not know just what I did think.

Somehow we worried through the day, eating together at dusk, having set our stakes and made preparations to begin real mining in the morning. As we finished eating, Rawlins remarked:

“Sorry, Raily, but your cabin’s on my claim.”

“You can have it,” said Jim shortly. “I’ll take out what I want in the morning. Want to sleep in there to-night?”

Rawlins grunted a denial.

“Tod and I will sleep just outside, if you don’t mind,” said Jim. “To-morrow we’ll straighten up things—or at least I will.”

Here, too, would be plenty of small game, though I hesitated at the thought of doing much shooting. Still, I had no desire to establish a record in long-distance fasting, and there was the prospect that my search might extend into a matter of weeks.

To my right a deep ravine ran down toward the valley, its end lost in the heavier woods of the lower country. I decided to follow this ravine, and after an hour's easy going I struck a well defined trail, and in the damp spots I could make out the sharp prints of sheep hoofs. While I realized that there might be a hundred different herds of bighorns in these mountains, with the chances one hundred to one against me, nevertheless the feeling persisted that this was my own particular bunch, led by the big buck and herded by Boss.

Yet I had to admit that the big buck had evidently jumped his job. That gave me a problem to chew on. Perhaps he and Boss had had another test of authority. I chuckled over this, for in my mind there could be no question of the outcome of such a struggle. Boss was crafty,

no doubt of that, and I shook my head in doubt as I thought of my own coming contest with this powerful and dangerous fighter. Would he still be the Boss, or would I?

I had another job on my hands before this test of wits was to come. With my thoughts on the future I had tramped far down the ravine, quite unmindful of the change in the nature of the land. My path lay between two immense boulders, their smooth sides stretching a full fifty feet above my head. The path between them was so narrow that I could easily touch both sides as I moved along. Looking down the path between these great natural gate posts I saw a little clear space, then an unbroken wall of smooth stone rose abruptly to dizzy heights. At the time I did not know that this pathway of mine led into a small box canyon, with sheer precipitous walls, its only outlet being the narrow path between the boulders.

As I stepped through this natural gateway I turned about to admire the rugged beauty of the towering rocks that bordered this narrow path. Standing thus, I heard a snort of defi-

ance and turned just in time to receive a terrific blow amidships, and in a twinkling I was hurled a full twenty feet back along the path between the boulders.

Startled and stunned, I hastily arose to face my unknown enemy. There at the entrance of the path, head lowered and eyes flashing defiance, stood the big buck!

In the first assault my rifle had been knocked clear of my grasp, and I stood as one paralyzed, unable to gather my wits about me to make the best of a strange and ticklish situation. Indeed, I could hardly believe my eyes, for who ever heard of a man being charged by a bighorn?

There he stood, ready for another attack. He was between me and the entrance to the canyon, and I dared not turn to flee down the path I had come. I knew his tactics, and I wanted to have the advantage of facing the attack. That moment he charged again.

Turning to one side I took the blow upon the hip, and again I went flying through the air, landing with a dull thud another ten feet down the path.

Then I began to realize that the buck wanted out of that canyon; that I had come upon him in an unguarded moment and his fear at finding himself trapped gave him a determination to fight his way out. I was perfectly willing for him to get out, but I did not relish the idea of being butted all the way back up that narrow defile. As the buck stood facing me, gathering his courage for another attack, a plan flashed into my mind. If he wanted out, by George, I was willing to help all I could.

As he lowered his head for another charge I gathered myself together for a mighty leap. On he came, ten feet, five, three—I put all my strength into the leap in an effort to jump high over his head and land behind him. To this day I can see those needle like horns below me. He was quick, and just as I cleared him he gave his head a toss, just enough to catch my flying feet and send me sprawling end over end like a ten-pin. I did alright behind him, but not in the manner planned, and I was considerably shaken up.

I sat up in time to see his flying heels dis-

appear around one of the boulders. He was not standing upon the manner of his going.

“Beat it,” I shouted. “Beat it, you old battering-ram. Don’t let me keep you any longer. I’m no hog for punishment. Beat it back to Boss and tell him that I’m hot on his trail.”

Dusting off my clothes and rubbing my black and blue spots, I picked up my rifle and started back down the path, determined to see the place, but on guard lest some other wild battering-ram should come charging out.

Small wonder that the old warrior had determined to fight his way out. It was a little pocket shaped like a gourd, and the walls were so steep and smooth that even a mountain goat could not hope to climb out. No doubt the old fellow had gone in there to get a few mouthfuls of the tender grass growing in the little basin, and hearing my approach and realizing that he was trapped, had thereupon determined to break past this new enemy or die in the attempt.

Turning back from this blind trail, I soon

flushed a mountain grouse from her nest and found three eggs of unquestionable freshness. Next I spotted a squirrel high in a fir tree, and a well-aimed shot brought him tumbling. Just before dark I came upon a noisy little brook and I felt sure that its quieter pools would provide fish for my breakfast.

Well content, I decided to camp by its clear waters, and on squirrel haunch, eggs and the last strip of my mouldy bacon, I made a splendid meal. Then I threw three big dead logs across the fire, rolled myself in my blankets, and was soon lost to the world of hills and boulders, towering trees and rushing waters.

When I awoke it was still dark. My fire was still burning, snapping and crackling in a contented sort of way. All was quiet and I drowsily wondered what had wakened me. I have always been an early riser, but not the kind that gets up and goes hunting daylight with a lantern. There was not a disturbing note in the night noises and all was serene in camp. I looked at my watch — two-thirty; much too early to roll out of my warm blankets.

So I turned over on my other ear and was fast dropping off into profound slumber when once more I sat bolt upright. This time I knew what had disturbed me. It was the sound I had traveled many a weary mile to hear — the hunting bark of a lone dog!

Of course it might be any dog; there was no certainty that that full-throated bark came from Boss, yet down in my heart was a feeling of absolute conviction. Gone on the instant was every thought of sleep, every last cobweb of drowsiness. For now that I had found my dog, a still greater problem confronted me. How was I to catch him?

Ever stop to figure out a thing like that; how you'd capture alive a dog as wild as any four-foot, and you without a trap of any kind? Ever since I had started on the trail my mind had been busy with schemes, only to discard each one as fast as I made it. At the last I had decided to bide my time and trust to circumstances and to the luck that seemed to have followed me ever since I had first entered the Rockies.

Just now there was no time to be lost in

speculation. The dog was easily a mile away and his bark indicated that he was on a hunt. He might be traveling fast and far; his herd might be many an hour's journey east or north or south or west. It was up to me to forget that there was such a thing as breakfast — aside from cold squirrel — forget there were trout in the brook that sang at my feet.

I rolled my blankets, packed grub and cook things in one motion. Then, pack on back, gun under my left arm and a hunk of squirrel in my right hand, I stumbled away through the darkness, following a bark that was stilled.

The sun rose and flooded the valley with light before I had covered the distance I had figured lay between me and Boss. I was mighty glad of the daylight, because I had a hope of finding some faint trace of the fugitive — a fugitive who did not know he was being chased. I had marked the direction well, and as soon as the sun was up I needed no compass to hold me to my course. Another northward mile was added to the one I had allowed and still no telltale sign. I was beginning to debate the advisability of

circling when a chance glance at the sky brought me my first real clew.

High against the blue, little more than a speck, a lone buzzard was sailing. Not circling as when, not a feather fluttering, they soar in great sweeping arcs, but in a smaller spiral that led ever downward. That sky scavenger, I decided after the first scrutiny, had sighted food.

The buzzard does not kill his own prey, so it was easy to guess that something else had made a kill and after eating his fill had left hide, bones and scraps of flesh for the next comer. Of course it might have been a timber wolf, or even my old friend, the mountain lion. I was sure of one thing; whatever it was had met a violent death, for most creatures of the wild "die with their boots on."

I had no intention of allowing the buzzard to beat me to the spot. By now I could tell pretty well where the center of his circle would fall, and I hurried to reach it before Mr. Feathers got there. I had great respect for that same bird when I located the object of his slow circle;

respect at least for the keenness of his vision. For from his dizzy height—a mile at least—he had caught sight of a tiny bit of fur, the last remains of the pest of western mountain campers—one Paddy Pack Rat.

Evidently he had not been a very toothsome morsel for his captor, or else that one had not been very hungry, for other bits were scattered about. Nor had the fellow been scared away before finishing his meal, as a beaten-down bed in the grass gave evidence. I felt of it but it had long been cold; deserted, probably, about the time I had heard that first bark. I was more certain than ever that it had been Boss I had heard; Boss who had made an untidy meal of the pack rat; Boss who had lain in the grassy nest.

Which way had he gone? That was my next job. North and south the going was extremely difficult. The western course lay down hill; to the east was an easy slope leading to a ridge. Putting myself in the dog's place, I reasoned it out that he had gone eastward. He had left his herd, he had hunted, he had

killed and eaten, then rested. Then, being an intelligent dog, he had gone to the highest nearby point to look the country over.

That sounded like good logic to me, and my first stop at the top of the ridge proved that it was correct dog logic. There, on a little bare spot, was a half-gnawed bone; another relic of poor Paddy.

“Now which way?” I asked myself. Then, as if in answer, dimmed by distance but still too distinct to be questioned, came a long bark, many times repeated.

“Good Boss!” I exclaimed. “I’ve got your number now and I’m on your trail for good.”

For in that bark I recognized, farm boy that I was, the herding call of the born sheep dog. Boss was no longer on the hunt; he was back at his main job, herding sheep.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE BATTLE OF THE BUCKS

“ Half an hour for breakfast, and no grub,” I exclaimed aloud. “ Now where is that fried trout I promised my tummy for this morning? I could eat a bluejay roasted in a fire made of his own feathers. Guess I’ll just take up a notch in my belt and chew that for breakfast. I wouldn’t dare risk a shot if I did see anything to shoot. Somehow, I have a feeling that to-day is going to be the big day.”

With this thought I began the long climb down the ridge. I passed several sheep trails, but a brief inspection convinced me that they were old ones which had not been used recently. I had descended far into the basin before I finally felt satisfied that I had hit the real one.

It was not an easy trail to follow, for the ground was strewn with many boulders and the sheep apparently preferred to leap from boulder

to boulder rather than to feed along the level ground. As for Boss, he left no trace of his passing. Still, by a nipped bush here, by a hoof print there, by the faint but unmistakable herd traces, I was able to follow with fair speed; soon convinced by the growing freshness of the signs that I was gaining.

It was noon before the sight of a nibbling gray shape sent my pulses leaping. One, two, three, four of them I counted, and then a clump of low bushes shut off my view. I decided to circle, hoping to be able to get far enough ahead to count the bunch as they passed; hoping, too, to catch a sight of the object of my long hunt — the Boss of the Bighorns.

I swung out a quarter of a mile, noting with satisfaction that the group of bushes was fairly small and that at the far edge it gave way to a little clump of trees. If I could make their shelter ahead of the herd I could shin up one of the tallest trees and have a perfect view of the bush region.

I was well out of breath and feeling weak in the mid-section when I darted behind the first

of the trees. I wanted to drop to the ground and get back my wind, but there was no time to be lost. I could rest in the tree-top. I picked one at the very edge of the clump, a long-needled pine whose heavy branches would hide me completely. I stopped long enough to sling my rifle across my back, then, wrapping my eggs about the trunk, I began the slow climb to the first branch, all of twenty feet from the ground. At last I reached the sturdy lower limb and drew myself up, puffing from the experience.

After a short breathing spell, I felt that I could climb a little higher. The climbing was comparatively easy now, and after another twenty feet I found a comfortable seat in the crotch of two giant limbs. I was well hidden here but at the same time I had a good view of the landscape.

For a long time there was nothing to see but low bushes waving in the wind. Half an hour passed and I was just beginning to doubt the wisdom of my move when out into an open space stalked a monster bighorn. I had to rub my

eyes twice before I could convince myself that this was not my buck, so alike were they in size, in shape, and in the regal sweep of rugged horns.

Perhaps even then I might have been doubtful had it not been for a most convincing proof. Hardly had the big fellow disappeared into the bushes again when his place was occupied by another buck, equally majestic in bearing. Even at this distance I was sure that this one was my old friend.

Two bucks in one herd!

A young one and an old one, I began to speculate. I was a front seat observer of one of the tragedies of the wild; the old master of the herd was about to be displaced by one of his offspring. Not to-day, perhaps. They might clash, and the older, wiser warrior be the victor; but some day the young buck, learning his lesson of final victory through his early defeats, would win the leadership of the herd. Some day young blood would tell, and the old leader would either submit or be driven off to lonesome wandering. Unless I had guessed wrong, that wandering had

already begun. That was why he had been away from the herd when I had first seen him the day before.

There they were again, a little closer this time, the young buck ahead, the older following him. Now the young buck had turned, his head held high. The old buck appeared to be quietly feeding, but I felt sure that no move of the other was escaping him.

It was a magnificent place for a battle, especially from my viewpoint, for the ground was level and free of bushes and they were close enough so that I could see perfectly. There could be no doubt that a battle was impending. The young buck was only too willing to try conclusions, and the old fellow, from the way he followed his young rival, showed that he, too, was spoiling for a fight. "Oh, well," said I virtuously, "if they must fight, I'm glad I'm here to see it."

The beginning came with unexpected suddenness. Throwing up his head with a bleat that sounded just a bit quavery and frightened, the old warrior stiffened his legs and stood ready

to meet a charge. I had been watching him and not the young buck, and so was a bit mystified by this maneuver, but not so an instant later.

The two met head-on, with a crash that could be heard all through the woods. It was as if two battering rams had collided full tilt. The impact sent both of them sprawling, but the youngster was the first on his feet and ready to renew hostilities.

“He’ll get him!” I exclaimed, my tone almost a groan. Strange as it may seem, my sympathies were all with the old fellow.

The end was not yet. The old buck’s apparent unreadiness was merely strategy, as the youngster found when, eager for a quick victory, he came dashing in. The old buck swerved and came in at the shoulder, sending the other rolling. It was his turn now to follow up the advantage, and he did so like an old general.

It was a full five minutes, and he had taken a world of punishment, before the younger animal was able to square himself away and once more meet his enemy horn to horn. They were at close quarters now and it was only a

matter of pushing, with no chance to deal a knock-out blow. In this the old buck was the master. He was the stronger of the two when it came to a stiff-kneed, horn to horn tussle, and he made his opponent give ground until at the last he broke and fled, bleating, into the bushes. The old buck had regained a temporary hold on his leadership, and the youngster had "run away to fight another day."

During the fight I had lost all sense of secrecy. The battle over, I became aware of a strange situation. Out of the bushes, from all directions, had come the rest of the herd. It was evident they had not been watching the fight, nor were they interested in the victor. They were watching me!

Spread out below me were some fifteen big-horn sheep, and there between me and the herd was their guardian — Boss of the Bighorns.

The sheep did not appear particularly alarmed; they seemed more curious than anything else. Probably I was the first man they had ever seen; certainly the first they had ever seen up a tree. I wondered what they would do if I should slide down.

Easy enough to find out. Down I slid and when I hit the ground and looked about not a bighorn was in sight. All about was the crashing of bushes as they fled, each with his own idea of safety and his own notion of the place to find it. As for Boss, no telling where he had gone.

"I sure tipped the coffee-pot then," I admitted ruefully, "but they had seen me anyway. Best thing I can do now is to climb back up the tree and see if I can locate them and watch for them to come together again."

This time I left my pack and rifle at the base of the tree and I found climbing much easier. I climbed all the way to the dizzy top, and from there I found that I could see all edges of the bush district. It was not many minutes before I saw first one sheep, then another, appear at the far edge, till the whole herd, even the two rival bucks, had gathered together. In a moment, led by the old buck and guarded in the rear by Boss, they moved slowly across a little hundred yard strip of open mesa and soon were lost to sight among the boulders.

"All right," I chuckled. "I'll be close behind you before long, but just now I have a pressing engagement with my stomach. These bushes ought to yield something in fur or feathers; if not, then this hunt is going to end right suddenly through starvation."

Fortunately, a foolish young rabbit had failed to be very much alarmed by the stampede, and sitting unconcernedly on his haunches, made an easy shot at less than thirty yards. "Now we'll eat," I declared enthusiastically, dropping pack and rifle where the rabbit lay and setting about the building of a quick fire. I soon had the rabbit dressed and cooking to a delicate brown, barely resisting the temptation to try the raw tender flesh. I made up for the delay a short while later, stuffing myself till I had to let my belt out the notch I had taken up that morning.

Having satisfied my hunger, once more the trail beckoned. It was no trick to find it, for I had marked well the spot where the herd had entered the boulder country, and from then on their path was as plain as a pike-staff. After a little I was following it by general direction

alone. They were traveling fast, not stopping to feed. Boss was taking them to man-free localities, and that meant higher, rougher ground. I felt sure that before night they would be away up on some inaccessible peak.

I missed my guess there, but not much.

Along toward dusk I found them on the craggy slope of a boulder-strewn mountain whose crest seemed to rest in the clouds. No path was discernible, and no human being could have made his way farther upward without a rope and a friend, and even then the conquering of that peak would be a feat to talk about.

The bighorns appeared to be over their fright and were now browsing about, with no great desire to go farther up the forbidding climb. For this I was exceedingly thankful. Although the wind was in my favor I used all caution in my climb to the top of a ravine-scarred cliff, hoping for a view of the whole herd, but especially wishing for a glimpse of Boss. He was nowhere visible.

The habits of dogs and sheep are not alike. I knew that the bighorns, if they were anything

like their domestic kin, would soon lie down and drowse until nine or ten o'clock; while the dog-like as not, had left his herd to the guard of the old buck and was already on the quest of his dinner.

I dared not get any closer to the herd, and yet I knew that at this distance I had no chance of locating Boss if he happened to be taking his evening nap. Here was a delicate situation. I do not know what I should have done had not my question been answered for me in an unexpected way.

I had been watching one of the bucks — which one I could not tell in the growing dusk. I noticed that he suddenly shied to one side, as if he had been scared. Nor did he return to the spot he had just vacated, although there was plainly some tempting shrubbery right there. On the other hand, neither did he run farther.

I looked closer. Was that a moss-grown rock standing there, or was it — yes, it was a hole; a tiny cave opening. Well, perhaps not a cave, but undoubtedly there was a hole or a shelf of some sort that made that blacker shadow. It

might be the mouth of a den. That would explain the buck's fright, but it would not explain his staying so close to danger, if danger really lurked there. Still, the closer I looked the surer I was of my eyes. There was a black opening of some sort, three feet or more across.

Now the buck would not be afraid of an empty hole, that was obvious. So there must be something inside. A wild animal? Not a dangerous one, at any rate, or the buck would not remain there quietly feeding. Just one other guess, and that guess became a surety when one of the other sheep, a ewe with a young lamb at her side, came close to the opening and grazed there without fear and without any apparent molestation.

No wild animal of prey was in that den, if den it was. I began to feel very sure that it was the night home of Boss. That was why the buck had darted away; why the mother sheep was allowed to feed there without Boss' threatening growl.

This conclusion brought my big problem home to me with pressing insistence. Now that I had found him, how was I going to capture him?

Dodging the full answer as long as I could, I decided that the first part of the problem was to get closer to the den. It had to be done carefully. One false move now, and the trail would lengthen again with lightning speed. Let one keen-nosed bighorn get wind of me, let one sharp ear catch the rattle of a tiny stone, the noise of a stumble, and away would go the whole herd and my glorious chance with it.

I cast off my pack and placed my rifle beside it. No matter what method I used in trying to make the capture, the rifle would only be in the way. On hands and knees, my gray flannel shirt and khaki breeches serving to give me something of the appearance of a sheep, I crept along, cautious from the very start. It was a long trip down that rough slope and up again, with many pieces of treacherous climbing before I halted at last, a scant hundred yards from that yawning hole. The wind being in my face, I knew that I had only to guard against sound. With the coming night darkness spread over the entire face of the cliff and I could no longer see the exact mouth of the hole.

However, I had marked the place well in my mind and I could have made my way blindfolded. On hands and knees I crept along, each move a studied one, each breath a conscious, silent part of my progress. Fifty yards left, and still no alarm. I waited a patient moment to steady my nerves.

Forward again, my caution doubled, if that were possible. Only a few feet more. The sheep had moved on a little way and the cave was unguarded. I discovered that it was a smaller opening than I had earlier thought, not over three feet wide and scarcely that high. I flattened myself on the ground and slowly wormed my body toward its yawning mouth. Now that I was within striking distance I began to wonder if I had the nerve to carry through the plan that I had developed as I crawled along.

The dog was within the den; of that I was more certain than ever. I had no weapons, not even a club. Could I go in, with bare hands, and subdue that big brute of a dog, made savage and fearless by wild, free living?

Could I even dare to make the try? There

wasn't much time left in which to dodge the answer. I heard a stir within the hole. The dog was coming out. The answer to my questioning came to me in a breathless rush.

I sprang to my feet with a shout that was as wild as the spot itself, and with arms outspread, flung myself at the black mouth of the cave.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A FIGHT IN THE DARK

Not a sound from within. I half recoiled, perplexed but still too unnerved to feel anything like relief. In that instant I hardly knew whether I was afraid Boss wasn't in there or afraid that he was. I gave vent to my mixed feelings in another loud whoop.

This time I received an answer; a low, menacing growl from within the cave. So Boss was at home after all!

Now what? Should I follow my first plan, or was it too dangerous? Just how much nerve did I have, after all? A dog is no poor antagonist; especially when a fellow gets down on his own level, hands and knees, and goes back to nature's way of fighting. My bare hands against his armed jaws; surely the odds were against me.

All right; we'd reduce them. Carefully guard-

ing the opening, I sat back on my haunches and peeled off my shirt. Catching it by collar and tail and stretching it wide, I crouched low and began to shuffle my way into the narrow hole. At the very first my heart failed me. My throat was unprotected; one leap from the dog and he would tear and choke the life out of me. It was not a pleasant thought. The cold sweat broke out on me, but for some reason my knees and elbows continued to carry me forward, despite the fear that lurked in my heart.

A deep snarl, a rush—and the fight was on!

My first feeling was one of relief, partly because he had not found my throat at the onslaught, but chiefly because at that first signal of real danger all thought of the fancied dangers disappeared and the blood pumped back through my veins and courage flowed back into my soul.

What boy doesn't love a real honest-to-goodness fight? I am not one of the hopeless minority. I will admit that I prefer to be able to see my foe, but at that I enjoyed every second of that struggle there in the dark; enjoyed it in spite of claws that ripped and tore my flesh,

and eager jaws that snapped at my throat every unguarded instant.

In that first attack I had dropped my shirt, all thought of strategy lost in the urge of battle. All of five minutes we struggled there, seeking holds and releasing them when found; twisting, turning, taking and giving many a grievous blow and bite. It was no pretty fight there in that narrow, cramped hole; the dog's hot breath in my face, his jaws dripping foam and blood on my aching hands and arms.

Then when he had nipped my wrist in a snap that was hard to dislodge, I thought of my shirt. Not much of a weapon, it might seem, but the best possible one in a combat of this kind.

I caught it up in my left hand, feeling with my right for the dog. He had backed away for the moment, but I found him a little easier than I had expected. Strong jaws and sharp teeth suddenly crunched into my bare forearm with a grip too tight for me to jerk away. I grappled with him, my left arm circling his powerful neck in a twisting, squeezing clutch

that carried all my strength. Slowly the dog's head came around until it was a question of letting go or taking a broken neck.

Boss was a crafty fighter and he let go to make a lunge for my unprotected throat. Fortunately my chin was in the way. I felt the blood spurt hot over my breast from a deep gash, but was thankful it was no worse. Striking out blindly I managed to fend him off, then crouched back as far as I could, my shirt once more in hand and ready for use. I knew that he would renew the attack, inspired by the damage he had done me. I would have the advantage by being on the defensive. Minute after minute passed without any movement on his part, so once more I made ready to reopen hostilities.

The first cautious motion brought a growl that showed a spirit by no means lessened. I growled in reply, which brought further outbursts from him, till the little hole echoed and rang with our noisy defiance. When the outlandish din was at its highest I dashed forward as fast as all-fours would allow. This time I

fared better. Boss snapped at me but missed. Before he could repeat I had closed in on him. Into his champing jaws I thrust my shirt, jamming it as far between his teeth as I could, then winding it around and around his head. By chance the sleeves dangled loose when my gag was all used up, and with their length I took a turn around his throat, then tied the ends in a hasty but secure knot.

"Now, you man-eater," I gasped, "I'll just drag you out into the fresh air. Between dust and blood my lungs are about to burst. I've heard of knock-down-and-drag-out fights, but this is the first I've ever engaged in — and the last, if you ask me. You've put your mark on me for life, I expect, but I've got you now, dead to rights, Boss, old boy."

Perhaps that may sound a bit like trying to rub it in. I confess that just then I felt as if I had a right to crow a little. Catching hold of the big fellow, who was still struggling despite the choking mass over his head, I tugged and jerked till at last I had him outside the hole. There I quickly threw him down on his side and

proceeded to make the gag less uncomfortable but more secure. Now I began to wish for my pack. In it I had a strap from which I could make a collar and a sort of muzzle. There was no danger of his getting his head free while I went after the strap, but so long as his legs were loose I dared not chance his dashing blindly into the darkness.

So I knelt, my back to him, reached around and caught his hind feet and pulled him up on my shoulder. A strong swing upward and across, and I had caught his forepaws in my left hand, drawing them up until the dog's body lay across my shoulders and curved around my neck. I had carried many a new-born calf to the barn that way.

Strangely enough, Boss made no great protest at this mode of travel, though I was in constant fear that his jaws would work free and make short work of me. In less than a jiffy we made the trip safely and I dumped him beside my pack. I opened my little roll of supplies and took out a short, stout piece of cord. With it I tied both hind feet together, then forefeet like-

wise, bringing all four together and knotting the cord securely.

“Now, Boss, my boy, far be it from me to hurt you in any way, but I think we’ll just let you lie there while I build a fire. Then we can finish our job in the proper way, for I will need a little light so that I can turn the trick right. Because, confidentially now, one slip and away you’d go. Now that I’ve got you, I rather propose to keep you.”

Fuel was plentiful and in short order I had a roaring big fire going. The pine branches made a splendid light, for all their hissing and sputtering, and I found that I could see well enough. I got the strap out of my pack and soon had a combination collar and muzzle which, while not exactly a thing of beauty, certainly looked substantial.

The next thing was to get it on. I figured that the cord I had used in tying his feet would, if doubled, be sufficiently strong for a leash.

“All right, Boss, guess you can take my shirt off if you’re through using it; the night air is a bit chill to my sleeveless undies, espe-

cially when they're soaked with gore. Let's see what a good dog you can be — when you're hog-tied and thrown."

Boss had no idea of being a good dog. I felt mighty thankful for the fact that he was helpless as to feet, for his growls rose in intensity as I began to unwrap his jaws. When the last fold of gray flannel came from between his teeth I sprang back hastily and with good cause, for at that he missed my nose by a most uncomfortable margin.

That lunge taught him that he was tied, and he at once lost all interest in me and turned his attention and his teeth to the rope that bound his feet. He would have made short work of the thin cord had he been able to put his undivided efforts to the task, but in a moment he was busily engaged in trying to dodge the muzzle that I was just as busily trying to slip over his lunging head.

It was a proud and happy moment when at last I succeeded in getting the awkward contraption over his nose. Confident that he could not bite me, I landed on him in a heap and soon

had the collar fast about his throat. Then I stood back and gave him the once-over.

“If that won’t hold you, nothing will, old boy. So I guess I’m the boss now and you’ll have to give up the name. Still, on second thought, I guess we’ll stick to it; it may help us to work out our little plan for the freeing of Big Jim. In the meanwhile I’ll just fix you up so you can’t gnaw at your foot ropes, and then we’ll turn in for the night. To-morrow, maybe, we’ll eat. A day’s hunting and feasting won’t do us any harm, and it may help us to get acquainted.”

I slept the sleep of the just that night, nor did I awake until the sun was high and beginning to feel hot on my uncovered face. I woke up with the appetite of a bear. My first look was for the dog. He was still there and apparently asleep, but at my first movement he began to struggle and growl.

“Still full of the old pep, I see,” I remarked pleasantly. “Well, old fellow, I think we’re going to be good friends — Oh, not right now,” as he made a snap for the hand I had reached

out toward him, "but one of these fine days you'll be eating out of that hand instead of trying to chew it up. Think it over while I go see if I can find us some breakfast."

That proved an easy matter, for a long-eared rabbit hopped out of some brush in a little valley, and the second shot brought him low. He was a tough old customer, I felt sure, but not so the next one that stopped to look me over from the crest of a hillock. I bowled him over the first pop.

"Guess that'll hold us for a while," I chuckled, as I picked him up and started for camp. Within a dozen steps I flushed a brush hen. Instead of flying, the hen ran clucking into the brush. I didn't shoot her, but I did find her nest. Only three eggs there, so I felt sure they were fresh enough to be edible.

"Hello, Boss," I called a moment later. "See what I've brought you."

A growl was his only reply to my greeting, but I fancied that his tone was not quite so unfriendly as it had been. Perhaps he sniffed the game. Hunger is a great leveler, and a

man's heart is not the only one that is reached by way of the stomach.

In fact, we two became quite chatty over that breakfast, though I had to work my imagination overtime to fancy anything but hostility in the snarls and sniffs that met my attempts at friendliness. After a little coaxing and long-distance petting by word of mouth, he condescended to eat, and at the last he even snapped the tiny morsels I offered him in my hand, though once he almost took a finger along with the meat.

At least we had made some progress. I decided to camp there all day; an attempt to lead the dog—I had released his feet and put him on leash—prompted me to make the decision, even if the argument put up by my many aching wounds had not been enough. Perhaps by the next morning he would lead a little better, and I would not be so sore and stiff.

So we spent the day in getting acquainted. It proved a tedious task, for just when I fancied I had made some progress the dog would turn on me as savagely as ever. It took a good deal of control to keep my own anger down, but I

realized that only patience and kindness would get the result I wanted. In time I got it.

Slowly, and none too surely, I broke down the animal's unfriendliness. He had been alone a long while, so long that he had forgotten the loneliness of the first weeks, and he had almost gone back to the wild. There was the merest shred of human liking to build on; a few months more and he would never have come back. But now it was just a matter of time and much patience.

"Boss, old fellow, you know I'm beginning to be right fond of you, but I doubt if anybody else ever will be. You look like a one-man dog to me, but you're sure a dandy!"

Never have I seen a more splendid specimen. Big, broad, well wooled and richly colored, he stood like a champion of his kind; clean-limbed and clear eyed, a thoroughbred if ever there was one. I felt like congratulating myself every time I looked at him, which was often, for down deep in my heart I knew that he was my dog in every sense of the word. Nor would it be long, I felt sure, till he would think the same.

Already he would look at me when I spoke to him, and I could walk close beside him without having him try to nip my legs.

When we had shared our fourth meal, which was breakfast of the following morning, he ate his share from my hand — yes, and licked my fingers afterwards.

“ So endeth the first lesson,” I quoted gravely. “ Guess we’re ready to hike, pal. I’ll just keep you on the leash, though. Not because I don’t trust you, old fellow, but — well, I’ll just keep a hold on you. Ready to go? All right, we’re off. Our next stop is Mineral City.”

Which in a manner of speaking it was, though we made many a pause to rest, to eat and to sleep. It was not so easy finding my way back as I had imagined. I knew my general direction, but it was hard work holding to it. The ravines had a trick of changing direction so gradually that a fellow didn’t notice it down where there was no sun showing to serve as a guide. Then when you climbed out again you were all at sea. Many a weary, weary mile we added to our journey, and many times our halt

found us no closer to our destination than our start had been.

Still we stuck to it; correcting our course at every chance and ever striking into new country, so that we had change even when we did not have progress. It was near night of the fifth day when we had our first glimpse of civilization; a far-off light in a lonely cabin.

I spent the night there, swapping yarns with a hermit prospector. Here I learned that my prediction concerning Boss had been a true one; he was a one-man dog. Old Skags, the prospector called himself, dared not venture closer than leash length of Boss, and then at his slightest move teeth were bared and Boss' snarl was a thing to be feared.

"How far to Mineral City?" Old Skags repeated next morning as I was ready to shoulder my pack. "Durned ef I know. 'Tain't more'n a hunderd mile, I reckon, even ef you count in the humps, but it'll sure keep you humpin'. The nearest way is some shorter, but it's tougher. Don't keer how tough? Huh! Time was I didn't nuther. That way you ketch on

down the valley to the old Piute trail. You'll know it by the heap o' stones whar they massacred some settlers 'way back. Foller the trail tell it branches, an' take the leetle branch. It'll peter out in a shake, but foller the gineral d'rection fur maybe a day an' you'll hit a wagon road. No wagon can go over it now but maybe you can ef that dog don't bite off your legs before you git thar. It'll take you straight in. Three days to make it, ef you don't tucker out."

I didn't. I reached Mineral City just before dark of the third day, and on that night, for the first time in months, I slept on a mattress and between sheets. Boss, plainly ill at ease in his new surroundings, alternately crouched beside the bed or over against the door, waking me up every little bit with his persistent whining.

Each time, as I dropped back to sleep again, I would catch myself saying:

"Wonder if the crazy scheme's going to work."

## CHAPTER XV

### BOSS SAVES HIS NAME

It was the big day of the trial; the lawyers on both sides were ready for their closing arguments to the jury. Such was the news that greeted me next morning on the front page of the only newspaper that Mineral City boasted. I read the account eagerly, growing hot and cold by turns as I saw the thinly veiled insinuations of guilt. One thing was very evident; Big Jim's lawyer was no friend of the editor.

At the conclusion of the article there was a short history of the case, and judging from the account, things surely did look black for friend Jim. All the surrounding circumstances very clearly indicated that murder had been committed. The body had been found, presumably hidden away by the accused, and there were two bullet wounds as the evident cause of death. Even Jim's own evidence, the letter, tended to

prove that the partner of the dead man had been the one to fire the fatal shot or shots. Rawlins and Shorty of course stoutly maintained that they had had nothing to do with the secreting of the body, and such testimony served to throw all the blame on Jim. The case had been rushed through with record speed; a credit, the paper declared, to the officials of Rock County.

Now the whole case rested on one point. Was Big Jim the man he claimed to be, or was he really Tom Raily, the partner of the man he was charged with having murdered? What could Jim offer as evidence of the identity he claimed? Only documents which the prosecution charged were papers stolen from the effects of the dead man. He carried no citizenship papers, and he had lost his passport, which, with his photograph attached, would have been ample evidence. It looked as if the best his lawyer could do would be to enter a motion for a new trial. This would give him ample time to get help from across the water, but at best it would mean the continued imprisonment of Big Jim.

At least that was the way it looked to me. "Providing," I said to myself as I chucked away the newspaper, "providing my own little scheme doesn't work, eh, Boss, old boy?"

I confess that I was a bit pale and breathless as I listened to the opening remarks of the prosecuting attorney. He struck me as being unnecessarily bitter and that his attitude was inspired by something more than an honest zeal for justice. Perhaps not; this was my first and only attendance at a murder trial.

As I sat there, sick and dismayed, nervously myself for the big attempt and finding it hard to keep down the great lump that persisted in rising in my throat, I felt more and more that I could never go through with my program; that my courage would fail me.

I was a mere boy, and these were seasoned men. Probably I would be thrown out for attempting to disturb the court, or, worse still, bounced on the head with a big billy club and dragged off to a cell to meditate on my lack of sense. The judge had an unusually severe look. To gain courage I reasoned that I had seen few

judges, and none on the bench; maybe they all looked that way.

Just when should I make the try? That was the question I kept asking myself. Each time the attorney cleared his throat or came to a pause at the end of one of his bursts of eloquence I tried to rise in my seat, but each time the fiery orator resumed before the courage to speak had oozed into my heart.

Then he stopped to take a drink.

Almost before I knew it I was on my feet. A voice that I did not recognize as my own, shrill with nervous excitement, rose high above the buzz of the courtroom.

“Your honor!”

The judge increased the severity of his look.

“What’s this? What’s this!” he demanded in harsh tones.

I was afraid he would order me ejected with his next words, so I plunged right into my plea; in my stage-fright forgetting all the careful wording I had rehearsed so many times, remembering only the importance of my plea.

“Your honor,” I stammered, “may I say a

few words that have a strong bearing on this case? I am probably the most important—”

“I object, your honor.” It was the prosecuting attorney, who had stopped halfway in his drink.

“Objection overruled,” said the judge, “temporarily at least.”

“If this boy knows anything about the case, why didn’t he offer himself as a witness?”

“I don’t know,” answered the judge wearily. “Let’s ask him.”

“I was in the mountains, two hundred miles—”

“I object, your honor. This case has been irregular enough.”

“I’ll be responsible for the irregularity, Mr. Taggart. Let the boy tell his story. You can go ahead,” the judge said, turning to me. “What have you to say?”

“Your honor, the witness is not sworn. I protest against this irregularity,” again objected the state’s attorney.

“I’ll cite you for contempt of court if you interrupt again, Mr. Taggart. Now, boy, tell

your story as briefly as possible — if your wind holds out.”

I had been gulping pretty hard, I will admit, but I did not thank his honor for calling attention to my scared condition. Right then and there I decided that what I had mistaken for sympathy for me was really dislike for the prosecuting attorney.

“ I should have been called as a witness in this case, and I would have offered myself at once if I had not been on the trail of the most important clew in this case. Besides, I did not know that the trial would begin so soon.

“ My name is Vance, Tod Vance, and I have been with the prisoner as his hunting partner for the last six weeks. His name is Jim Raily, no matter what you have been calling him here.

“ Now I am the one who discovered the body of the dead man. I was the first one to read the letter that lay under his hand. I was — and am — the most important witness of all in this case. I am one witness, at least, who has no personal reasons to make me want to distort the facts.”

I could not resist this dig at Shorty and Rawlins.

“The prisoner, Jim Raily, has not been able to identify himself satisfactorily to the court. On the other hand, neither has the state — this gentleman here and his witnesses — been able to prove beyond a doubt that the prisoner is his own brother Tom — ”

“What is this, young man? A Fourth of July oration, or have you really got something to say?” This from the judge, who struck me as looking half way between being bored and amused.

“I sure have!” I exploded, abandoning my made-up speech, “and you better listen to me unless you want this man here,” I pointed to Attorney Taggart, “to make a fool of — ” A frown clouded the judge’s brow and I realized I had gone too far, but there was no going back — “of this court,” I finished lamely.

“The youngster’s taken over that job,” sneered Taggart.

“Order!” rapped the judge; then to me, “Get on with your testimony.”

“I will. No one has been able to establish positively the identity of the prisoner. Nor can I do it satisfactorily, for I have known him only six weeks. There was just one witness who could identify him, but he had not been called — not even thought of in this trial, and I have traveled many a weary mile to get him.”

“And did you?” The judge’s tone showed awakening interest.

“I did. Is it the wish of the court that I bring him in?”

“Shucks, yes!” exclaimed the judge.

“Before I do, I want to ask your honor one question. A friend will lie for a friend, or at least he will see things the friend’s way, and his testimony will be prejudiced.” Here I was on firm ground; this was part of the speech I had rehearsed. “An enemy will lie against his foe; his testimony is to be regarded with suspicion because it is inspired and poisoned by hate. But did your honor ever —” I paused, to let it sink in — “did your honor ever know a dog to lie or give false testimony?”

The judge opened his mouth as if to answer,

then closed it again. Evidently he was not going to commit himself.

“ You have heard read in court the letter that was found under the hand of the dead man. In that letter you heard mention of a dog, a wonderful shepherd dog. His name was given. If you have forgotten it, I will tell it to you. It was Nip.

“ I trailed this dog over mountain and ravine, trapped him and brought him back. He is the one witness who can positively identify the man who killed his master.”

“ I object, your honor.”

“ Go ahead and object,” his honor answered cheerfully. “ I like the lad’s way of putting it over. Let him go ahead, Taggart; he isn’t going to run against you in the coming election. All right, Vance or Tod, whichever comes first, go ahead and spring it—you seem to be running this show. “ What’s your idea? ”

“ I’m all through. All I want now is to introduce my witness. If Jim Raily, the prisoner here, is the man who shot the master of this dog, Nip will show it. He will recognize him.

If the prisoner is innocent he will be willing to make the test. Jim Raily, are you willing? "

" In any way the court suggests."

" Has your honor any suggestions? "

" I'll hear yours first. You seem to be running this dog show."

" Then let the prisoner call the dog, by name. A dog—a real dog—never forgets his friends, and if they were friendly Nip will soon show it. If not—well, I'll give you a demonstration of what he acts like toward people he doesn't like."

" I object, your hon— "

" Forget it, Taggart. This case has been taken outside court for the moment. Let's forget that we're judges and juries and even prosecuting attorneys looking for re-election, and just be human beings who like to see something new. What's the harm in it? "

Taggart grumbled, but subsided.

" Shall I bring in the dog? " I asked.

" Bring him in—on a rope," added the judge.

I hastily scrambled through the crowded courtroom and out onto the street. The place where I was stopping was just three blocks away and

I made the distance in record time. Boss was waiting for me. With his teeth he had severed the new piece of rope with which I had tied him, but he seemed overjoyed to see me. The chambermaid tried to stop me and explain why my bed had not been made, but the chewed rope had already explained that and I hurried past.

I held Boss in short leash as I opened the courtroom door. There was a rush to get out of the way, for at sight of the great crowd the hair had bristled on Boss' neck and he looked far from friendly.

"Some dog!" I heard one man exclaim, and I could not refrain from a fervent, "I'll say!"

The judge was rapping for order. "Bring the dog up here," he commanded. "Hold him where the jury can see him but where he can't see the prisoner in the box. Give the leash to a bailiff. Here, Conley, take hold of the dog—and take care he doesn't take hold of you. Now, boy, you go over and stand beside the prisoner. We're going to make this a thorough test."

I handed the leash to the bailiff, wondering if

Boss would take a notion to sample the flavor of Conley's legs. For some strange reason Boss only sniffed at the bailiff's trousers, then curled up and lay down at his feet. I went over and stood beside Jim, risking a handshake before I sat down on the rail.

"All right, boy, call your dog," said the judge.

"If I do the bailiff won't be able to hold him."

"I'll risk it. How about you, Conley?"

"If the court orders," uneasily.

"Call him," ordered the judge.

"Here, Nip," I called.

"That's enough!" exclaimed the judge hastily, as the dog tried to break away. "All right, prisoner at the bar, you call him. Do it as if you really wanted him to come."

"I'll try. Here, Nip; come, Nip, that's a good dog! Here, Nip, here, Nip, Nip!" urged Big Jim.

The dog did not stir. It was as if he had not heard.

"Bring the dog over closer, Conley, so he

can see the prisoner.” The bailiff complied with the order. “Now, call him again,” ordered the judge.

Jim obeyed. The dog looked toward him, then up at the bailiff, who had the leash tight, then he rolled himself up and lay down.

“Call him, boy.”

I called, “Nip, here.”

In one motion he sprang to his feet and lunged forward, the suddenness of his spring upsetting the bailiff who let go of the rope to save himself from a spill. In a jiffy Boss was in the box beside me, paying no attention at all to Jim.

“Satisfied, Judge, or do you want one more test?”

“I’ll accept another.”

“All right.” I stepped out of the prisoner’s box, and, catching up the end of the leash and wrapping it tightly around my fist, I exclaimed, pointing at Jim:

“Take him, Nip!”

The dog changed into a fury. His teeth bared, he sprang at Jim and only the leash kept him from reach of a pair of hastily withdrawn legs.

"Down, Nip, down! Come over and touch him, Jim. Nip, let the man touch you — that-a-boy."

I straightened up. So did Boss. I turned, and with the dog at my heels made my way to the back of the courtroom. As I stopped near the door I heard the judge say:

"Well, Mr. Taggart, have you anything further to tell the jury before I give them their final instructions. Nothing? Not a word, Mr. Taggart, to answer the dog? Well, neither have I. Bailiff, escort these jurors to the jury room where they can deliberate on their verdict."

"Do we have to go out?" asked a flannel-shirted fellow who had been whispering to his companions in the jury box all through my test.

"Not if you have already reached a decision."

"We have."

"And it is — "

"Not guilty! Every man on this jury owns a dog!"

It was a week later. We were sitting in front of the cabin there on our claim, three of us, Jim and I and another. That other was saying:

“So that was how it was. Tom and I were good enough partners, friends better’n most mining partners, until he took sick. Then his mind kind of got poisoned. I tried not to pay any attention, knowing he was a sick man, but it soon got so I either had to leave or get into a fight. He imagined all kinds of things—that I was going to rob him of his claim, kill him, steal his horse—anything. Wouldn’t touch a bite of food or a sup of coffee unless I took some first. I knew his sickness was the cause of his suspicions.

“Then he got hurt and I went for the doctor. My horse fell and broke his leg, so I had to come back. He went wild but finally let me start out again on his nag. When I got back he was gone, so it didn’t matter that I hadn’t been able to bring the doctor with me. He was gone for nearly a week—guess that was where your friend Shorty fell in with him. I was asleep when he came back. Delirious he was, clean out of his head. Six-gun in one hand and the lamp, half tipped over, in the other. Crazy as a tick.

"I took a bullet in the side to get at him, but I was pretty hard hit and he had the strength of a madman. Finally I had to use my gun, but I didn't think I'd hit him, not bad anyway. Last thing I saw of him — I jumped his horse out of the corral — he was standing in the doorway, the lamp held above his head, the smoke curling from his pistol. Yes, sir, and he wasn't looking at me at all, but was standing there calling that dog of his, Nip.

"I just got out of the hospital at Auro a week ago. Saw about your trial and hot-footed it over — got there two days too late. So I come on up here."

"Mighty glad you did, Barnes," said Jim heartily.

"The dog, Nip, where is he?" asked Barnes. "I'd like awfully well to have him."

"So would Tod," said Jim, with a quiet chuckle. "He thought he had the dog trained for life; bragged about him morning and night till I threatened to throw both of them out of camp. Early this morning, to show me up, Tod takes off the leash and tells Nip — or Boss, as

he calls him now—to go play with his tail. So that's the last of Boss."

"You think so," I remarked confidently.

"Why'd you rename him?" Barnes asked.

"It's a good yarn," answered Jim, "and I doubt if the youngster could do it justice. He wrenched his imagination so hard the first time he told it that he hasn't recovered yet. Tod claims that after you left my brother died behind a closed door. The dog, unable to get into the cabin, and being a born sheep dog, goes out in his sorrow and adopts a herd of sheep, which he tends with all the care of a hen with one duckling or a grandmother with one curly-head."

"But there aren't any sheep around here," objected Barnes.

"Ah, there's the joker," snorted Jim. "You hit it right on the head. For our worthy sheep dog, not being able to find a ready-made herd to his liking, goes out and makes himself one, just as his dog ancestor did ages ago to some sheep ancestor. Barnes, the story goes—according to Tod—that Nip goes out and proceeds to conquer a bighorn buck and take over the rule of a big-

horn herd. Can you beat it? ”

“ Not hardly. I heard a good one while I was in the hospital about a cat that mothered a fox, but this is in a class by itself.”

“ The worst of it is,” concluded Jim, “ that this artless youth expects us to believe it. Acts as if he believes it himself and is insulted because no one else will.”

“ If you fellows had seen what I saw you wouldn’t be uppish,” I said with some heat. “ I saw Boss lick a mountain lion — ”

“ Didn’t I tell you? ” interrupted Jim, turning to Barnes. “ Poor boy. I guess it’s the altitude; it affects some people that way when they get up high where the air is so rare. He didn’t really believe it himself at first. It happened weeks ago and he didn’t tell me about it till just the other day.”

“ I’ve told you a dozen times since then that I didn’t have a chance — things happened too fast.”

“ I’ll say so,” heartily. “ But I’m afraid, Tod, that you’ve lost your dog to the wild for good this time, bighorns or no bighorns — hey!

What in thunder's that!" he fairly yelled, and pointed up the ravine.

We both looked. It was worth a look. Worth even Jim's excited exclamation.

It was Boss! Yes, Boss returning. But he was not alone. Boss had justified his name; he was still "Boss of the Bighorns," for over the edge of the little ravine and down into our valley he was driving, single file, the whole big-horn herd!





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